

WITTY TALES OF Badshah & Birbal

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PREFACE

Birbal's name is a household word in India, but it has not attracted as yet the English reader to the same extent for a number of reasons, the chief of them being the fact that no authorized version of his tales has been published in English.

Birbal was the brightest luminary in the court of Emperor Akbar who had collected around himself a galaxy of countless luminous stars, the chief nine of them being known as the nine priceless jewels of his court. Akbar, the most illustrious representative of the Moghul dynasty was a victor of a hundred battles, astute politician, erudite scholar and great lover of art, music and literature. By

precept and practice, he displayed a rare spirit of religious indulgence—a fact which contributed not inconsiderably to the establishment and maintenance of healthy brotherly relations between the Hindus and Muslims, the two major communities inhabiting this vast subcontinent. The fact that he not only possessed merit, but could recognize it too, wherever he chanced to notice it, attracted to his court profound scholars, eminent poets, able politicians and valiant heroes. Faizi, Abul Fazl, Raja Mansingh, Todarmal, Birbal, Kavi Gang, Tansen, Khankhanan, Mulla Do-pyaza and tens of other stars shone brightly in his court, birbal being the most luminous of them.

Who Birbal was, where and when he was born, how he happened to be admitted to the court of Akbar are questions on which the opinion among the historians is sharply divided. One historian believes that he was born of a Brahmin family at Kanyakubja in the district of Hamirpur. He was, according to the same authority, appointed poet-laureate in the court of Raja Bhagwandas of Amber, who presented him to Emperor Akbar. Another historian is of the opinion that he was born at a small

village named Trivikrampur. Badawni thinks that Birbal's original name was Brahmadas and that he belonged to the race of bards and minstrels. Vincent Smith, a renowned authority on Indian history, writes that Birbal's original name was Maheshdas, and that he was born at Kalpi.

Whatever elements of truth there may be in these conflicting and contradictory statements, it is beyond doubt that Birbal was a poor man in his early life and that he became Akbar's favourite of favourites by his keen intellect, superb poetic faculty and inimitable talent for ready-wittedness. He was a historical figure, whatever else he might have been. Akbar turned to him in times of perplexity and sought his advice on intricate political issues. He cannot be labelled as a court-buffoon whose sole business it would be to shun business by diverting his master through puns, and witty—and at times vulgar remarks. Birbal's wit was of a sublime nature. His repartees have earned him an abiding place in the literature of the world. He could be familiar, but by no means vulgar. Besides his sterling qualities of head and heart, he was remarkable for his

physical prowess. Though he belonged to the priestly class whose business it was to preach and teach, he displayed remarkable courage and great valour on the battlefield. He died on the battlefield like a warrior true to the best traditions of the warrior-class.

A large number of his repartees and tales of ready-wittedness have been attributed to his authorship, and the witty tales fathered on him are read and related with absorbing interest all over India. An attempt has been made here to glean some of the priceless gems from the inexhaustible mine of literature commonly attributed to Birbal's authorship, and to offer them to the English reading public who, we confidently hope, will derive both amusement and instruction from their perusal. There is very little in the literature of the world which can bear comparison with Birbalian literature both in uniqueness of witticism and freshness and variety of material.

History has glorified Akbar, but hearsay has conferred greater glory on Birbal who is made to eclipse his master at every stage of their contact by the brilliance of his intellectual lustre. He scores a decisive

victory on his master in every battle of wits or words. Akbar recedes into back-ground when Birbal hurls his volley of repartees at him with the dexterity of an ace debater. This is cruel injustice to an illustrious emperor like Akbar, who ranks very high among the heroes of India. In their enthusiasm to glorify Birbal, the story-tellers have pictured Akbar as a man of weak understanding and dull intelligence, setting silly questions to Birbal, which served only to expose the shallowness of his mind and bankruptcy of common sense. The historical Akbar and Birbal cannot be such as are described in these witty tales.

My grateful thanks are due to Mr. Nandlal M. Thakkar for entrusting me with the task of rendering these tales into English, and for undertaking the publication of this book. He has greatly enhanced its value by getting special pictures drawn by Mr. Iqbal Husain whose ancestors claimed close relations with Akbar and his court. These pictures do not bear on any particular incident in the stories of this book. Our aim in including them in this book is to give the reader a glimpse into the pomp and pageantry of the

Witty Tales

Moghul dynasty, especially during the days of Akbar, when they were at their height.

An explanatory note on these pictures will help their critical appreciation to a considerable extent.

Picture No. 1 on the cover shows Birbal seated on his **gadi** in a contemplative turn of mind.

Picture No. 2 shows the Badshah being diverted by the sallies of Birbal.

Picture No. 3 shows Akbar in his royal palace.

Picture No. 4 shows the Badshah in the company of his 'nine gems.' Birbal is seen next to the Badshah on his left-hand side.

Picture No. 5 shows Akbar in his full **Darbar**. A delegation of Christian clergymen is seen waiting on him with a Christian girl to seek royal favours.

At the end of the Book

Picture No. 1 : The Badshah is seen playing the game of Polo—a fact which proves that the Polo is not exclusively a Western game.

Picture No. 2 : Prince Saleem, heir to the Imperial **gadi**. He was known as Badshah Jahangir after the demise of Akbar.

Picture No. 3 is a famous portrait of Nurjahan, wife of Jahangir.

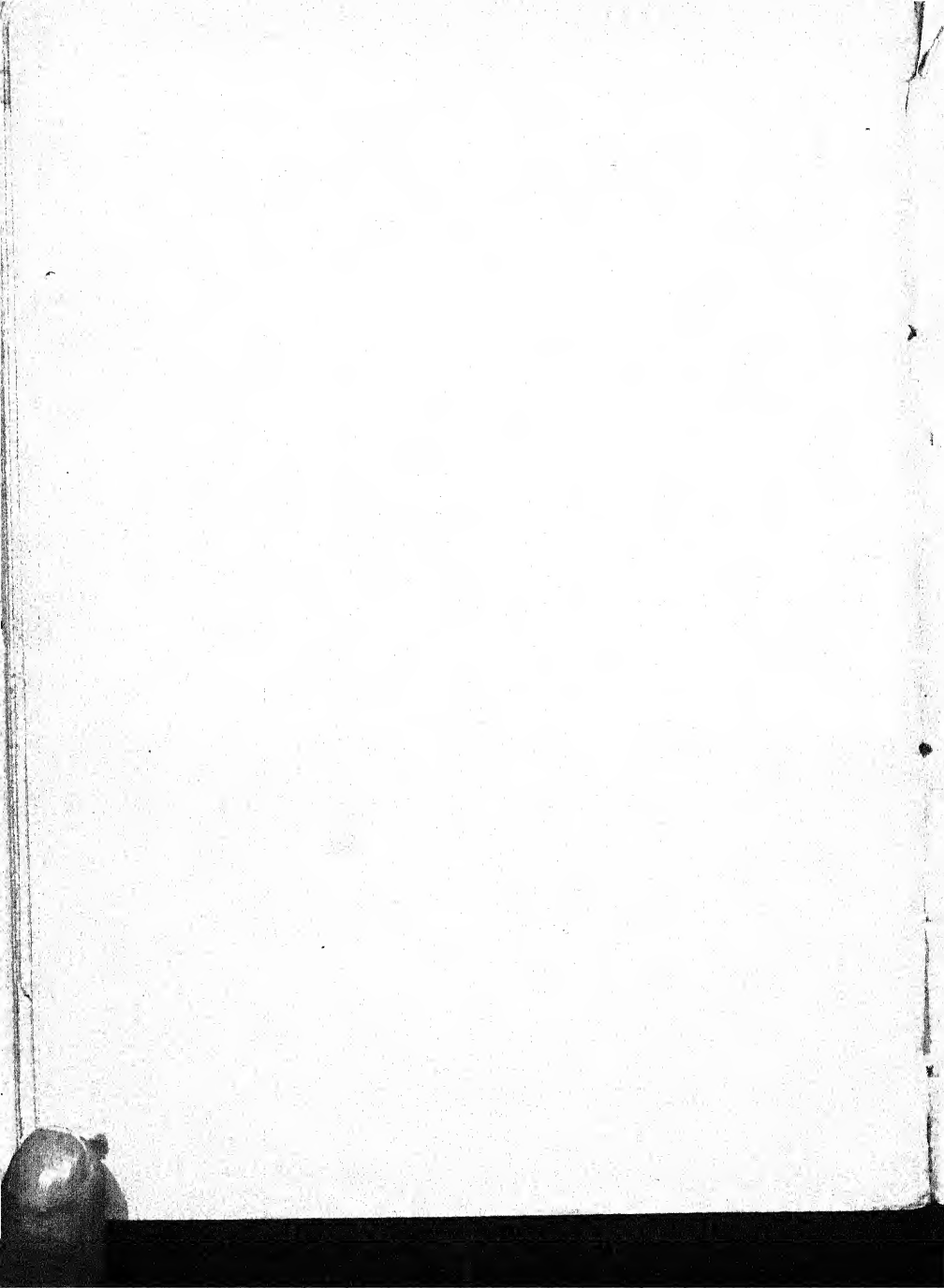
Picture No. 4 : Queen Jodhabai, the first wife of Akbar and mother to Saleem.

Picture No. 5 and 6 have been described above.

In the end, I acknowledge my debt of gratitude to my friend, Mr. Ramanlal N. Shah, Proprietor of the Ashok Printery, but for whose active interest in the writing and printing of this book, its publication would have been well-nigh impossible.

Indore, }
May, 1946 }

M. S. Patel



Know God By Reasoning

During the glorious reign of Akbar, the illustrious Emperor of Delhi, there lived a painter of rare merit in a certain town. His fees for a single portrait were five thousand rupees to be paid in cash.

Once upon a time, a certain angel came to him in the guise of a respectable gentleman.

"If you draw my portrait without the slightest flaw in my features," said the stranger, "I will give thee five times thy usual fees."

This generous offer transported the artist with joy and he at once closed with it. He took great pains to draw a portrait of exquisite art. When it was ready, he sent word to the honoured customer requesting him to come down and see the picture. The gentleman came there, observed the portrait minutely and found fault with the ear in the painting.

The poor painter was down-hearted. After some time, he executed another piece of art, thinking that it would meet with the spontaneous approval of his patron. This time the gentleman pointed out that the hand in the picture was defective. Thus every time he went to the customer, the latter showed one defect or another. The artist felt nettled at this humiliation and thought that death was preferable to dishonour. He therefore resolved to put an end to his life by drowning himself in the water of the sacred river Jamuna.

When he was about to execute his resolve, a poor Brahmin named Birbal chanced to notice him. Seeing him gloomy and dejected, Birbal approached him and inquired what worried him so much. The artist told him the tale of his woes and besought his help.

"Don't you worry, my friend," replied Birbal, "I shall draw a portrait to the entire satisfaction of that gentleman. Take me to him to-morrow morning."

The painter was pleased at the words of Birbal whose look convinced him of his earnestness. The next morning he went to his customer accompanied by his new friend, Birbal

purchased a mirror on his way. The gentleman was anxious to see his painting.

"It is ready, Sir," replied Birbal. With these words he held the mirror against the face of the gentleman who could perceive therein his faithful representation. The gentleman was helpless. He gave the artist the promised sum. While he was alone, Birbal bowed to his feet and said "Sir, you seem to be an angel. I will not let you go."

The angel who was deeply impressed with the intelligence of Birbal gave him a **darshan** and blessed him. His grace enhanced the reputation of Birbal all over the country and he could become the recipient of royal honours and favours.

II

Brave Yet Timid

One day Emperor Akbar said to Birbal, "Fetch me a person from the city, who may be both brave and timid at the same time."

This was a hard nut to crack. Birbal pondered over the imperial order for a couple of minutes, and then went out in quest of such a person. He found out a woman whom he took into the presence of the Emperor, saying, "Your Majesty! Here is a woman who is both brave and timid at the same time."

"How so?" enquired the bewildered Emperor.

"She leaves her home," replied the wise minister, "at dead of night and proceeds to meet her lover in face of heavy odds. She is not daunted by heavy rains or pitch darkness. She hoodwinks the armed sentry and accomplishes

her will at all hazards. Tell me, Your Majesty, can there be a nobler example of courage and bravery ? While abed in the house, she is frightened to death by the slightest noise of rats. Who can be more timid than she at this hour ?"

This intelligent answer pleased the Emperor who bestowed royal favours on Birbal.

III

A New Calendar

One day when Akbar was in a holiday mood, he said to Birbal, "We have revised the calendar from to-day, so that the new calendar month will be double the present one."

"It is an excellent idea, Your Majesty!" replied Birbal promptly, "It will please me more than anything else."

"How?" said the Emperor, who had expected that Birbal would not be able to make a suitable reply to his novel revelation.

"Why," returned Birbal on the spur of the moment, "under the new arrangement the bright half of the month will have a duration of thirty days. We shall enjoy moonlit nights continuously for a double period."

This ready-witted answer rendered the Emperor speechless.

IV

The Grateful And The Ungrateful

Once upon a time, the Emperor asked Birbal to bring him two animals one of whom might be grateful and the other ungrateful. Birbal racked his brains, but could not see his way through the tangle. Akbar got wild with him and ordered that if he did not carry out his behest by the end of the next day, he should be condemned to death.

Every courtier could realize the gravity of the situation. His enemies were delighted at the prospect of his imminent death. The court dispersed in an atmosphere of wild excitement. Birbal went home and lay on a couch without knowing what to do. His smart daughter could read anxiety on his face and wished to know what made him so pensive. Birbal told her

everything and hung down his head, whereupon the intelligent girl answered, " This is child's play. Don't you be worried about it, for God's sake. I'll point out the way to you to-morrow morning. "

The encouraging words of his daughter set his anxiety at nought, for he knew of the rare intellectual gifts of his daughter.

The next day when he was ready to go to the royal court, his daughter requested him to take with him his son-in-law and his dog. This was enough to whet his intelligence. So he went into the presence of the Emperor with his son-in-law and the dog.

All the courtiers held their breath. They thought that he had lost his wits. The Emperor got excited at the presence of a dog in the court. He asked him if he had brought the two animals asked for. Birbal made a deep salaam to him and replied with perfect equanimity, " Here are the two animals, Your Majesty asked for. "

" These animals ! " shouted the Badshah, " Are you so impudent as to cut a joke even at my expense ? "

" May it please Your Majesty, " returned

Birbal humbly, "I am not joking, I mean business. Pray lend me your ears. One of the two animals is my son-in-law. Shower the choicest gifts on him, yet his greed is insatiable and he will never feel grateful. This dog is, on the other hand, gratitude incarnate. He will stand by his master through storm and through sunshine. He will follow his master's voice and will not desert him, let heavens fall."

The Badshah being satisfied with Birbal's explanation ordered the son-in-law to be beheaded, as he did not want ungrateful souls in his domain. The hangman was about to execute the royal order when Birbal cried out, "Tarry, Your Majesty. This order applies to all of us alike. We are also sons-in-law of some persons."

The Emperor heartily enjoyed this fun and gave a handsome reward to Birbal for his witty reply.

V

A Biter Bit

A poor man had a dream one night that he had passed a full night at the place of a certain prostitute in the town, for which he had agreed to pay her ten gold **mohurs**. Being a simpleton, he revealed the contents of his dream to his neighbour in the morning. The neighbour told it to his friend, and thus it spread through the whole town in no time. When it reached the ears of the crafty harlot, she decided to exploit the situation. She went to the poor man and demanded ten gold **mohurs** in pursuance of their agreement.

The man got nervous and could give no answer to her. She was bent on extorting the full amount from him, and so dragged him in the court of justice. The magistrate heard both of them patiently. He pondered over the case

for a long time, but could not decide it, as no provision was made for such a strange case in the code of the country. He therefore sent both of them to Birbal in the royal court, because he alone, thought he, was competent to judge such queer cases. Birbal gave them a patient hearing, and then asked a servant to bring him a large mirror. He arranged ten gold **mohurs** in such a way that their images could be seen in the mirror.

"Take the gold **mohurs** you see in the mirror," said he to the bewildered prostitute.

"Your Excellency," said she firmly, "it is only an image of the **mohurs**. What can I do with it? I want the substance, not its shadow."

"How can you claim real **mohurs** for an imaginary experience? Your complaint is as unreal as the image of **mohurs**."

Hearing the learned judgment of Birbal, she rose to quit the place, but he stopped her, saying, "You have harassed this poor man with malicious intent of extorting money from him. You cannot go unpunished. I sentence you to two months' rigorous imprisonment."

The poor man offered Birbal a thousand thanks for his keen sense of justice.

VI Counting The Crows

One day the Badshah had a fancy to take a census of all the crows inhabiting the city of Delhi. He sent for Birbal and set him this Herculean task.

"I have already taken such a census, Your Majesty!" said he. "There are sixty thousand, five hundred and fifty-two crows in Delhi."

Akbar who was taken by surprise at this ready answer said, "If their number is greater or smaller?"

"Never mind, Your Majesty!" was the answer. "If the number is greater, take it that their friends and relatives must have come as their honoured guests. If it is smaller, some of them must have gone out to see their foreign friends and relations."

The Emperor was exceedingly pleased with his reasoning and presence of mind.

VII

An Elephant or a Musician ?

Once the Emperor was entertained by the sweet music of two eminent musicians named Lad and Kapoor. Their music transported him with so much joy that he gave them an elephant in recognition of their exceptional skill in music. The poor musicians dared not decline the royal gift and had to spend a lot of money on the upkeep of the animal, lest the Emperor should feel offended; but when all their financial resources were exhausted, they got anxious about how to feed the elephant.

They thought over the question for a considerable time and said to themselves, "If we continue to keep the animal any longer, our children will be reduced to beggary. But how to get rid of him? A royal gift can neither be

disposed, of nor be given away to another person. "

At last Lad hit upon a plan to be rid of this costly dignity. "If we let loose the elephant," said he to Kapoor, "with a drum and a stringed instrument fastened to his neck, we shall be rid of this botheration."

Kapoor also liked this idea and they gave a concrete shape to it in an instant. The elephant began to roam about wilfully and harass the people in the town, who at last complained to the Emperor about this nuisance. Akbar got wild and ordered the police authorities to find out the owner of this animal.

After a full inquiry, the police authorities reported that he was the same elephant as His Majesty had presented to Lad and Kapoor. The Badshah summoned the musicians to the court and asked them why they had let the animal wander at large.

"Your Majesty!" said they humbly, "we maintained him for full one year and imparted to him the art of music. Now that he is well-versed in music, we have allowed him to go out with the musical instruments. He will wander far and wide in your vast empire and please the people with his sweet music.

Thus he will be able to earn his living and give uswhatever he can spare."

The Emperor could not refrain from laughing at the trick of Lad and Kapoor. He could perceive his mistake and gave them a village yielding good income as a prize.

VIII

Who Is Guilty ?

Birbal had like all persons occupying important position a number of enemies. He was fully aware of his enemies' intrigues. He would laugh at the silly allegations of bribery, misappropriation of money and persecution, levelled against him, because he himself was innocent.

They did not refrain from backbiting, saying that he patronized the Nagars, his caste-fellows everywhere. This charge was true to some extent and so they always poisoned the ears of the Emperor.

On coming to know of this charge, Birbal was extremely delighted and began to show favours openly to his community. One day he was sitting down for evening worship, when a certain Brahman came there begging loudly. He

welcomed him and overwhelmed him with favours publicly in the court.

When his enemies complained to the Emperor about this incident, he thought that Birbal was transgressing all limits, and so ordered him to be produced before him. His enemies began to be delighted. He was sure that he would be summoned. Hence he went to Delhi gladly as if he were going to attend a wedding, and no sooner did he come than he went to the royal court. Seeing him come so soon, all were taken by surprise. He approached the throne and made a deep salaam to the Emperor. Akbar simply gazed at his face and thought within himself that a guilty person would not wear such a smiling innocent face.

IX

A Clever Reply

One night the Badshah went out incognito to study the condition of his subjects. He came to the river Jamuna, where he saw three women crying bitterly. He approached them and asked them what made them weep so piteously. The women wondering who there could be to accost them in that lonely place, looked behind and saw an angelic figure talking to them. On seeing him they bowed to him respectfully and one of them replied, "My husband is a farmer. He swims across the river every day to attend to his work beyond the river. They say that a swimmer loses his life in the water. This impending danger makes me weep."

Another woman said, "My husband goes out every night for thieving. He will lose his life

some day like a spider entangled in his own cobweb. This is the cause of my grief. "

The third woman answered. " My husband is much younger than I am, and the blooming rose of my youth is withering away without a bee to enjoy it. "

Having heard the answers of the three women, the Badshah went home. The next morning he waited for the arrival of Birbal. When he came up, Akbar said to him, " Last night I saw three women crying bitterly on the bank of the river. Can you tell me why they were weeping ? "

Birbal thought for a moment and then answered, " One of them must be anxious about the safe return of her husband from beyond the river. Another is worried about the life of her husband who is a thief. The third casts a longing, lingering look at her passing youth. Thus all the three have their tales of woe to tell. "

These extraordinary visual powers of Birbal afforded immense joy to the Badshah who showered rich gifts on him.

X

As You Sow, So Will You Reap

Once there was a discussion between Akbar and Birbal on varied matters. Akbar wished to know from Birbal why there obtains a sharp cleavage between the prince and the pauper, and between the rich and the poor.

"Your Majesty!" replied Birbal, "that is a God-made difference. God does justice to all. He gives everyone according to his deserts. As men sow, so will they reap."

The philosophical significance of this reply made a deep impression on the Emperor.

XI

The World Father

One day the son of a prostitute was being tried in the royal court. The Emperor would frequently inquire of the prostitute the name of the boy's father. The poor woman would hang down her head out of shame. Birbal felt compassion for her and came to her help.

"Your Majesty!" said he, "if you don't mind, I may give out the truth. You are his father."

The Badshah began to fume and fret at this public scandal and asked Birbal how he could prove it.

"Lord of the Earth!" replied Birbal, "you are the father of the whole world. Doesn't it follow therefrom that this boy is your own son?"

This answer rendered the Emperor speechless.

XII

Whither Does the Sun Go ?

One evening Akbar was sitting in his river-garden, feasting his eyes with the beauty of the setting sun dancing in the crystal-clear water of the Jamuna. Birbal also came there to give him company. While they were talking about all sorts of things, Birbal said, "Your Majesty, why does the sun hide himself in the west?"

'You had better go to a fool to get an appropriate answer to your question,' returned the Badshah.

'Your Majesty!' rejoined Birbal promptly, 'that is exactly why I come to you with this question.'

The Badshah could see that he was made a fool of by Birbal, yet he forgave him and bestowed rich gifts on him for his frankness and witticism.

XIII

Whom Does God Help ?

'What would be of the utmost use at the time of war ?' inquired Akbar of Birbal one day.

'Presence of mind,' replied Birbal.

'What is the use of the presence of mind ?' said Akbar, 'We must have potent weapons in war-time.'

'I stick to my belief, Your Majesty. Presence of mind is the most powerful weapon of war. Let us put it to the test.'

'All right,' said Akbar, 'I shall see it to-morrow.'

The next day Akbar let loose a mad elephant in a narrow lane and ordered Birbal to go home through it. In pursuance of the imperial order Birbal entered that lane. The elephant no

sooner saw him than rushed at him furiously. Birbal looked round and found a dog lying at one corner. Birbal using his presence of mind seized him by the hind legs and turning him round threw him at the elephant. By chance, the dog fell right on the trunk of the elephant and bit him severely. The animal felt so much pain that ignoring the presence of Birbal, he began to trumpet aloud. Birbal saw his chance of escape and stealthily walked along and crossed the lane.

When the report of this incident reached the ears of the Emperor he was much astonished at this feat of intellectual jugglery and physical prowess, and conferred a handsome gift on Birbal.

XIV

Whither To Go ?

The court musicians Lad and Kapoor were in the good books of the Emperor. They received more royal favours than any other musician. One day they gave offence to the Badshah unwittingly. Akbar asked them why they had committed such a grave offence. They thought that, as they were the favourites of the Emperor, they would claim exemption from punishment. Far from expressing their regret for the offence, they began to chuckle over the episode. Akbar would have pardoned their offence, had they cared to apologize to him, but they took it very lightly. The Emperor was enraged at their impudence and ordered them to quit his empire.

Now they could see how foolish they were.

They left the court not knowing how to appease the angry king. As they didn't like to go out of Delhi they would spend their days in a jungle nearby and come to the city at night. They spent about six months in this way, but how long could they pull on thus? At last, they deemed it advisable to consult Birbal and seek his help. One night they approached Birbal and prayed for his help. Birbal was moved to pity, and showed them a trick. On the following day, when they went out for a stroll in the Bazaar in accordance with the instructions of Birbal, they were seen by the Badshah, who was quick to recognize them. He chased them, but they climbed a tree and sat on a branch. 'Why haven't you yet quitted my kingdom?' said he to the musicians.

'Your Majesty!' replied Kapoor humbly, 'we carried out your order and wandered from country to country, but wherever we went, we found that it was a part of your domain, so extensive and limitless is your empire. At last, we have returned to Delhi to decide where to go. We have climbed this tree in our upward journey to the sky, as there is no other place on the earth where your empire does not extend.'

The Badshah laughed at this answer and ordered them to get down. They came down and tendered an apology to the Emperor for their offence. Being pleased with their ready-wittedness, he pardoned their offence and re-instated them in their position.

A Jury of Untouchables

On one occasion Akbar and Birbal were sitting in a private chamber and talking about all sorts of things. Seeing that the Emperor was in a happy mood, Birbal said to him, 'Your Majesty ! I beg one favour of you. If I commit an offence, I wish to be permitted to choose the jury by whom I may be tried.' The Badshah gladly complied with his request.

After a number of days, it so happened that Birbal intentionally committed an offence, for which the Emperor decided to punish him. Birbal was afraid that he would be punished with a fine of about fifteen thousand rupees. He therefore humbly reminded the Emperor of his promise, which would empower him to choose the jury for his trial. Akbar agreed to his

proposal and said, ' You can choose a panel of five judges and the sentence they pass will be binding on me also. '

' Your Majesty ! ' said Birbal, ' summon five untouchables from the city and let me be tried by them. '

' Non-sense ! ' said the Emperor, ' how can these low people try you ? Why don't you choose some respectable gentlemen or some such persons ? '

' Your Majesty ! ' returned Birbal, ' let other people look upon them as men of the meanest order and the lowest scale of humanity, but I regard them as my brothers. We are all equal in the court of the Lord. My case should be judged by them. '

The Badshah sent for five untouchables. When they arrived, he acquainted them fully with the nature of the case and ordered them to pass a verdict thereon. The untouchables were overjoyed at the prospect of having an opportunity of wreaking vengeance on Birbal and thus to make their importance felt. They retired to a private room and began to discuss the case among themselves.

One said, ' My friend, let us impose a

heavy fine of one hundred and fifty rupees on him in view of the gravity of the offence. '

Another said, ' No, no, friends. That would scarcely be fair. Such a heavy fine will kill him, and his children will be reduced to beggary. In my opinion a fine of one hundred and ten rupees should be imposed on him. '

Hearing this, the third cried out. ' Why do you mortgage your common sense ? Whence will he borrow such a huge sum ? If we fine him seventy rupees, he will remember it through all his life. '

Thus they wrangled for a long time and unanimously reached the conclusion that Birbal should be punished with a fine of fifty rupees. They considered even this fine very heavy, but they could not set aside the claims of justice and fairplay. When their deliberations were concluded, their leader went to the Badshah and said to him with due deference, ' Your Majesty, we have fixed the amount of fine to be imposed upon Birbal after a searching examination of the whole situation. With your permission I would announce the result of our long deliberations. ' The Emperor asked him to communicate their decision to him.

'May it please Your Majesty!' said the leader, 'the offence of Birbal is of a grave nature meriting severe penalty. Our judgment will teach him a lesson he will never forget in his life. We have decided to impose a fine of fifty rupees on him. We know the amount is heavy. We feel much for him, but the Goddess of Justice is blind. We can't help it.'

The Badshah could see through the trick of Birbal. He could understand that a poor man would be guided by his own standard of life in judging the condition of others. It is no wonder fifty rupees would be no small sum for an untouchable whose living would horrify even a savage. His hard labour during the whole year would not yield so much money. The Emperor therefore let the Jury go home and pardoned Birbal, being pleased with his study of the working of the human mind.

XVI

Buddhi Sagar

Having heard much about the high intellectual powers of Birbal, the Shah of Persia addressed a letter to Emperor Akbar, requesting him to send Birbal to his capital as a royal guest. Akbar was only too glad to comply with his request and sent Birbal to Persia with great pomp. On reaching the capital of Persia, he sent a messenger ahead of him to inform the Shah of his arrival.

The Shah was eager to test his intelligence; so he asked his courtiers to put on clothes exactly like his. Then all of them sat in such a way that it might be difficult for Birbal to distinguish the Shah from the rest of the courtiers. When they were seated thus, Birbal was summoned to the court. Just as he entered the court, he could

see that the Shah had laid a plan to test his intelligence. He paused for a moment, cast a sharp look around and went towards the Shah by slow steps. When he was at a respectable distance from him, he made a deep salaam to him in keeping with his imperial dignity.

The Shah was simply astounded at this. He was exceedingly pleased with Birbal and accorded a royal reception to him. He then wished to know from Birbal how he could recognize him.

Birbal replied, 'Your Majesty! I could know you from the fact that all eyes were fixed on you, whereas you were looking steadily at all as a body without fixing your eyes on any individual member of the royal court.'

The Shah was so much impressed with this reply that he conferred on Birbal the highest title of the state '**Buddhi Sagar***'. He also entertained Birbal at many a banquet and when he departed to India, he presented him with untold riches in appreciation of his unusual talents.

* It literally means 'An Ocean of Intelligence.'

XVII

Who will conquer ?

Once Akbar was about to go to the battle-front. ' Shall I win or lose the battle ? ' said he to Birbal.

' Lord of the World ! ' replied Birbal, ' I will answer that question on the battle-field. '

On reaching the battle-field, Birbal told the Badshah that he would be victorious in the battle.

' How could you know that ? ' asked Akbar.

' Listen to me, Your Majesty ! The enemy king is riding on an elephant. Now the elephant is an inauspicious animal, because he throws dust over his head. On the other

nand, you are sitting on a horse who is very auspicious. These facts lead me to the conclusion that your victory is past doubt.'

Akbar was pleased with this answer and when Birbal's fore-cast came true, he rewarded him with a priceless gift.

XVIII

An Obstinate Child

One day as Birbal could not attend the royal court, the Badshah sent a messenger to summon him. The messenger went to his residence and said to him, ' His Majesty the Emperor wants you to go to the court just now. '

' I am going there presently, ' said he to the man.

The Emperor waited for him about half an hour, but Birbal was not to be seen there. He therefore again sent the messenger to fetch him. This time Birbal sent him back with the same answer. After another half an hour, he sent another messenger with the same message. But this time also he came back with a similar answer from Birbal. Akbar was enraged at

such impudence of his minister: He ordered a corps of policemen to go and produce Birbal before him, using force if necessary.

The corps of policemen went to the residence of Birbal and delivered the imperial order to him. Birbal thought that if he now hesitated, he would be visited with severe punishment by the Badshah. He at once put on his dress and went into the royal presence. He made a deep salaam to the Badshah who without responding to his salaam angrily asked him why he did not come though he was called thrice.

'Your Majesty!' replied Birbal, 'I couldn't come so long, because my son was crying and I had to soothe him before I could leave my place, as you know children are notoriously obstinate.'

This answer exasperated Akbar instead of pacifying him. 'What rot you talk!' said he to Birbal. 'Do you want to make a fool of me by such an evasive answer? What time does it take to quiet a child? Give it a thing after its heart and it will stop crying in an instant. It is not difficult for an intelligent man like you.'

' True, Your Majesty ! ' replied Birbal, ' You have had no experience of conciliating a child when it is cross. You have no idea of a child's obstinacy. Excuse me for saying so. '

This reply soothed the anger of Badshah, who said, ' It is a wonder that an intelligent man like you cannot win over a child. Were I you, I am sure I would succeed in pacifying a child, however cross it may be. '

' Let us do it, ' answered Birbal. ' As Emperor, you are father to your subjects. Take me as your son and try to pacify me. You will have the first-hand experience of a child's obstinacy. '

Akbar took a liking to this novel idea. He showed his willingness to play the father to Birbal, who then sat down on the ground and began to cry aloud like a child. Akbar came down from the throne and began to employ various devices to quiet him. He passed his hand gently on Birbal's body and said, ' My child ! what makes you cry ? ' Birbal cried more bitterly.

The Emperor tried many a trick to divert him, but in vain. Akbar was at his wit's end

how to amuse him. He asked Birbal again what he wanted.

'Bring me a sugar-cane.' answered Birbal pulling a long face.

Akbar ordered a bundle of fresh sugar-canes to be produced there. When the bundle was lying there, he asked Birbal to take whatever piece he liked. Birbal however did not stop crying, but asked Akbar to select a cane for him.

Akbar picked up the best cane from the bundle, but Birbal threw it away. At last he picked one and asked Akbar to peel it off and cut it off into pieces. Akbar did as he was told. Then Birbal asked him to put them into a cap. When Akbar did so, Birbal threw it away. Akbar began to collect the pieces lying on the road. After having put them together, he said to Birbal, 'My child, be quiet. Have I not done as you told me?' Birbal did not cease weeping, but began to roll on the floor. Akbar inquired why he was doing so.

Birbal answered, 'Why have you cut it up? Join the pieces into one whole sugar-cane.'

Akbar was at a loss to understand what to do. He asked Birbal how it was possible. Birbal

said, ' If it is not possible, how is it possible for me to stop crying ?'

Thus the Badshah was unable to quiet the child. He was convinced that a child's obstinacy would baffle even God. His anger was calmed down.

They resumed their seats amid loud applause.

XIX

The Centre of The Earth

One day the Begum said to the Badshah, ' You consider Birbal exceptionally intelligent. I want to test his intelligence by asking him one question. If his answer to my question is correct, I shall grant that he is really talented. '

' What is that question ? ' inquired the Badshah.

' My question ' Where is the centre of the earth ? ' will puzzle all your courtiers. ' said the Begum.

The Badshah could not refrain from laughing at this question, because he knew full well that, though the question appeared to be a difficult one to a layman, it was easy to an intelligent man like Birbal. He therefore replied to the Begum, ' All right. I am sending for Birbal just

now to prove his cleverness in your presence ! ' Saying so, he immediately summoned Birbal to the harem.

On his arrival, Birbal was seated on a chair and after a little while, the Badshah asked him, 'Birbal ! where is the centre of the earth ?'

'Your Majesty !' replied Birbal, 'the centre of Your Majesty's imperial court is the centre of the earth.'

'How can you prove it ?' said the Badshah.

'If you want any scientific proof,' answered Birbal, 'please get the earth measured. Delhi is the capital of an emperor like you. Hundreds, nay thousands of merchants come here from a distance of thousands of miles. What other centre of the earth can there be ?'

This answer gave full satisfaction to the Begum who could see that Birbal was more than a match for her. She requested the Badshah to bestow precious gifts on Birbal.

XX

A Diamond Of Sugar

One night Birbal was moving about in the town incognito to make a personal study of the people. On his way he heard the piteous wails of somebody, proceeding from a cottage near by. Birbal went there and knocked at the door. The wails stopped and shortly afterwards an old man of sixty opened the door. On seeing him Birbal said gently, 'As I heard somebody weep here, I thought I should come here and help him out of the difficulty if I can.'

It was a dark night and there was no light in the house. The old man could not recognize Birbal. He said, 'Sir, it was I who was weeping.'

'Pray tell me what it is that makes you so miserable,' said Birbal.

' I was bewailing my lot, ' said the old man. ' What purpose will it serve to describe it to you ? Kindly don't ask me any more about it. '

' My friend, ' said Birbal affectionately, ' don't conceal anything from me. Tell me everything about the cause of your sorrow and I shall try my utmost to help you. '

' It is a dark night, ' said the man, ' and there is no light in my house to enable me to see your face. Please tell me who you are and I shall narrate to you the tale of my woes. '

Birbal thought that it was mid-night and he felt like sleeping. He therefore revealed his identity to the man and asked him to go to his bungalow the next morning. Hearing that it was Birbal to whom he was talking, the old man was simply astonished.

The next day he got up very early in the morning and went to the bungalow of the Minister. Birbal asked him to relate his story.

' Your Excellency ! ' said the man, ' I am an artisan, but now I cannot perform laborious tasks on account of old age. It is a well-established truth that wealth and learning do not

generally abide at the same place. Wherever there is learning, there is no wealth, and wherever there is wealth, there is absence of learning. Without being disheartened by this fact I believe that craftsmanship is a priceless jewel, and there is no dearth of jewellers like you to recognise its worth. Your Excellency ! I had only one son who was the main prop of my life. He worked and maintained me, but as the luck would have it, he also passed away a fortnight ago. His untimely death has reduced me to this sorry plight. Yesterday was the third day of my fast, so I was praying to God for help. God responded to my prayer and sent you to me. May he bless you. '

Birbal took pity on him and ordered his servant to feed the hungry old man. He also gave him some money, saying, ' Sir ! you are a good craftsman. I give you this money which will buy you food for fifteen days, during which time you should try your skill on a solid lump of sugar, so as to make it appear exactly like a diamond. You should bring it to me on the night of the fifteenth day from to-day. '

The old man blessed Birbal and went home. He at once began the task entrusted to him.

He tried his skill on the lump of his sugar so exquisitely that nobody would call it otherwise than a genuine diamond. He took it to Birbal at the appointed time. Birbal was astonished at his superb craftsmanship. He praised his work and asked him to pass that night there. They got up early in the morning and went to the Badshah when he was about to take his bath. Akbar asked Birbal why he had come there so early.

'Your Majesty!' answered Birbal, 'this man came to my place early in the morning with a diamond of the first water. Thinking that it is worth being set in your crown, I have brought it to you.'

'Let me have a look at it,' said the Emperor.

'Here it is, Your Majesty!' said the man, taking it out of his pocket.

The Badshah was pleased at the sight of such a beautiful diamond and said to Birbal, 'Keep this diamond with you and ask the man to come to the court after two hours.'

'Your Majesty!' said Birbal, 'I am likely to be detained longer at home, as I have some urgent private work. If I come late, the merchant would be put to a lot of inconvenience.'

Moreover if I chance to lose it, I would have to pay for it. What does it matter, if it lies with Your Majesty ? '

The Emperor complied with his request and thrust it into the pocket of his vest. Birbal went home with his permission. On the way he explained his trick to the old artisan, asking him to go to the royal court at noon.

While taking his bath, Akbar forgot everything about the diamond. While changing his clothes after his bath, he had no idea that there was diamond in the pocket of his vest. The diamond was dissolved in the water.

When the court assembled at noon, the merchant went there. On seeing him, the Badshah remembered the diamond. He sent servants to the Palace to search for the diamond. They ransacked the Palace, but could not get any trace of the lost jewel. They returned to the court and informed the Emperor of their failure to find out the jewel.

' Well Birbal ! ' said he, ' the diamond seems to have been lost. Give the merchant the full value of the diamond and satisfy him. '

Birbal called the jeweller and informed him

that the Emperor was pleased to buy his diamond. He asked him its real price.

'Your Excellency!' said the man, 'I had paid three thousand rupees for it. The Shah of Persia offered to buy it for the same price, but I would gain nothing from such a transaction. I thought I would make a present of it to Emperor Akbar and, I am sure, he would give me an adequate reward.'

'All right,' said Birbal, 'We shall give you fifty gold **mohurs** more than its actual price.'

'Excuse me, Your Excellency,' answered the man. 'I cannot sell the diamond, unless I get a net profit of two thousand rupees. If you cannot pay that price, I shall give it to the Emperor as a humble present from me.'

'We can't take the diamond gratis,' said Birbal. 'Take four thousand rupees.'

The man did not swerve from his resolution. He was not ready to accept a pie less than five thousand rupees.

At this time, the attention of the Badshah was drawn to this haggling. He intervened, saying, 'How much does he demand, Birbal?'

'Your Majesty!' answered Birbal, 'he purchased the diamond for three thousand

rupees, and I offer him one thousand more, but he refuses to accept it. '

' Birbal, ' said the generous Emperor, ' why haggle with a poor man ? Give him what he asks for and satisfy him. ' Saying so he ordered the treasurer to pay the man five thousand rupees. The man thankfully received the money and went home. He blessed Birbal for this help and passed the rest of his life in happiness.

XXI

An Ass's Burden

One pleasant morning in summer, the Badshah and Birbal went out for fresh air and exercise. While they were returning home, the sun rose and it began to get hot. The Badshah said to Birbal, 'It is very hot now. Will you carry my overcoat?'

Birbal put the overcoat on his shoulder and they began to walk homeward. When they had walked a considerable distance, the Badshah said to Birbal, 'How much burden do you carry now?'

'That of an ass, Your Majesty,' replied he. The Emperor was silenced by this reply.

XXII

Who Is An Ass ?

One day when the court was in session, Birbal gave out a sharp blast of wind, which was a serious breach of etiquette. The Emperor got angry with him and said, 'You are a silly ass. You do not know court etiquette.'

'Your Majesty !' replied Birbal respectfully, 'formerly I was very wise, but of late I have been influenced by the company of asses.'

The Badshah deemed it wise to remain silent.

XXIII

Truth and Falsehood

'What is the distance between truth and falsehood?' inquired Akbar of Birbal one day.

'Only four inches', replied the ready-witted Minister.

'How?'

'Your Majesty!' answered Birbal, 'the proof lies in its verification by the eye. Whatever we can see is truth. Whatever we hear is not always true; it may be false. Now the ear is the instrument of hearing just as the eye is the instrument of vision. There is a distance of four inches between the eye and the ear. Hence it follows that there is a distance of four inches between truth and falsehood.'

The Badshah was exceedingly pleased to hear this intelligent answer.

XXIV

Who Is Greater ?

One day the Badshah went to his court before others, and sitting on the throne, he would put the following question to every courtier who came there. 'Who is the greater of the two: Indra or I ?'

The courtiers could not give any reply to this question, because they thought that if they called Indra greater than Akbar, the latter would take offence, and if they called Akbar greater than Indra, they would have to substantiate their statement. They were sure that Birbal would make a suitable reply to this delicate question.

When the question was put to Birbal on his arrival, he replied on the spur of the moment, 'Certainly, Your Majesty is greater than the King of gods in Heaven.'

'How ? ' said the Emperor.

'Your Majesty ! ' answered Birbal, 'The Creator of the Universe first of all created you and Indra. He put both of you in each pan of a balance in order to determine the superiority of one over the other. You outweighed Indra and your pan came down to the earth where you were installed as Emperor of these mortal beings. Indra's pan went up to Heaven where he was installed as King of Gods. That is why I called Your Majesty greater than Indra. '

The Badshah was much elated to hear the answer and admired the intelligence of Birbal, who had really meant to convey that Indra occupied the highest position and he had the lowest one. Akbar failed to grasp the deep significance underlying the terse speech of Birbal. He was, on the other hand, much pleased at having been proved greater than the King of gods. All courtiers acknowledged Birbal's superb intelligence and presence of mind.

A Knotty Problem

One day Akbar came to the court before everybody else and put the following question to every courtier who came there: 'What is twenty-seven less nine equal to?' All courtiers gave the same answer, 'Eighteen.'

Birbal was also asked the same question, when he arrived. Without a moment's thought, he replied, 'Nought.' All wondered at this answer and laughed at his mathematical inexactitude. The Badshah remained grave and asked him to explain himself.

'Your Majesty!' replied Birbal, 'there are twenty-seven constellations in all. If we take away from them nine constellations belonging to the rainy season, the remaining eighteen

would be useless to all intents and purposes. Only those nine are useful, the remaining eighteen being as good as nought. This is how twenty-seven less nine is equal to nought. '

This explanation put to shame all those who had previously derided Birbal, who received a rich prize from the Badshah for his convincing answer.

XXVI

Counting The Stars

Once upon a time the Badshah said to Birbal, 'How many stars are there in the sky, Birbal?' It was a difficult question to answer and all courtiers anxiously looked at Birbal to see what answer he gave. Pointing to a tamarind tree not far away from the court, Birbal replied, 'There are twenty-five more stars in the sky than there are leaves on that tree.'

'How am I to know the extent to which your answer is correct?' said the Emperor, doubting the correctness of Birbal's answer.

'We can engage a vast army of reckoners to count the leaves and verify my answer. This will enable us to determine the precise

number of stars in the sky. '

All were pleased to hear this answer. The Badshah, though not convinced of the truth of Birbal's answer, was deeply impressed with its plausibility and bestowed a rich gift on him in recognition of his high intellectual powers.

XXVII

Hair On The Palm

One day the Badshah and Birbal were sitting in the court, discussing public affairs. At the end of the discussion, the Badshah thought of asking Birbal a question. Birbal's fame was spread throughout the length and breadth of the civilized world and it was customary with the Badshah to set him a naughty question with a view to increasing his own store of general information.

Pointing the palm of his hand to his Minister, he said, ' Birbal ! Why is there no hair on the palm ? '

' Your Majesty ! ' replied Birbal, ' the cause is self-evident. As you use your palm constantly, while giving alms to the poor, and

gifts to the learned, the hair thereon is rubbed off and it has no scope to show itself. '

The Badshah who was dissatisfied with this answer asked another question in order to drive Birbal in a corner. He said, 'Then why is there no hair on your own palm ? '

'Sire ! ' answered Birbal, ' while receiving presents from Your Majesty, I use my palm, and thus the hair on it is worn out. '

The Badshah thought over this answer for a moment and further said, ' Birbal you have made suitable replies to two of my questions. Now I have one more question to put to you. Supposing that hair does not grow on my palm or yours because of my giving or your receiving presents, how is it that there is no hair on the palms of my other courtiers ? '

'The reason is not far to seek, ' replied Birbal. 'When you confer gifts on me or anybody else, they cannot bear it. They are eaten up with so much jealousy that they rub their hands together, wearing out the hair on their palms ! '

The Emperor was pleased with this sarcastic answer and the courtiers hung down their heads from shame.

XXVIII

The Acme of Intelligence

Once as Birbal could not attend the court for three or four days on account of illness, the Badshah paid a visit to his bungalow in order to see how he was. He occupied a chair near the bed of the patient and inquired after his health. Meanwhile Birbal had a strong desire to move his bowels. He therefore begged of the Badshah to excuse him, and went to the lavatory.

The Badshah thought that he should see whether or not this illness had blunted the intelligence of Birbal. As soon as this thought came into his mind, he caused a piece of paper to be deposited under each leg of the patient's cot, and sat there waiting for Birbal, as if nothing had happened.

By the time Birbal came there and lay on his bed. He began to look at the ceiling and the floor of the room alternately. Seeing him uneasy, Akbar asked him what he was doing.

'Your Majesty!' replied Birbal, 'during the time I was in the lavatory, something has happened to my bed. It has risen up by the breadth of a paper or the ceiling has come down to that extent. I don't know how this has come to pass.'

The Badshah and his aide-de-camp were filled with profound astonishment at the marvellous discovery of Birbal and his keen sense of perception.

'Indeed,' said the bewildered Emperor, 'Your intelligence is matchless. I had caused a piece of paper to be deposited under each leg of your cot in order to see what effect this illness had on your intelligence; but you felt its presence by your supernatural perception. You have got through the test.'

He thanked Birbal and went home.

XXIX

The Dearest Object

One day the Badshah was offended with his favourite queen for reasons best known to himself. He punished her by ordering her to quit his palace at once and go to her father's house.

The queen received a cruelly rude shock at this order and solicited the Badshah for merey; but all her entreaties fell on deaf ears. At last being disappointed, she decided to seek the advice of Birbal. She summoned him to the harem and acquainted him with the whole situation. Birbal pondered over the matter for a while and hit upon a plan to help the queen. He showed her a trick and took leave of her.

The queen ordered her servants to pack her luggage for the Badshah to say farewell to him.

In the meanwhile, she prepared a glass of **Sherbet**, mixing with it a small quantity of a soporific drug. When Akbar came there, she entreated him for pardon, but in vain. He said, 'My orders are irrevocable; however I grant you one concession. I allow you to take from the palace whatever you love most.'

'Dear !' said the queen with heavy heart, 'If your orders are irrevocable, I beg one favour of you as a parting gift from you. I request you to drink a glass of **sherbet** offered by my hand, because it is uncertain whether I shall have the privilege of serving you in the future or not. Will you not show this small favour to your poor sweet-heart ?' The Badshah walked straight into the trap carefully laid by the queen under the guidance of Birbal, and granted her desire. She filled a glass of sherbet and the Badshah drank it unhesitatingly. The drug had its effect in a short time, and he fell fast asleep. The queen had carefully worked out all the details of her plan. She caused the sleeping Badshah to be placed in a palanquin which was kept ready there and she herself sat in another. They left the palace when it was dark, and journeying all through night, they reached the capital of the queen's father in the morning. The Badshah

was laid on a cot in a luxurious apartment of the palace. When the drug had run its course, the Badshah awoke from sleep to find himself amid unfamiliar surroundings. He said to himself, 'Am I in a dream or have I been transferred to another place?' The queen approached him with a tooth brush and toilet materials for him. He inquired of her whether he was in a wakeful condition or in a dream.

'Dear ! you are perfectly wakeful. Will you please brush your teeth and say your prayers ?' The Badshah who was still full of bewilderment said, 'This does not seem to be an apartment of our palace. Tell me where we are.'

'O Fountain of Grace !' said the queen with folded hands, 'this is the palace of my father. I have come here in pursuance of your yesterday's order.'

'True, but how have I come here ?' said the Emperor with unabated surprise.

'My Gracious Lord !' replied the queen, 'you allowed me to take with me the thing which I liked most ? What else can I love more than you ? So I brought you here with me.'

The Badshah was much pleased at the trick

of the queen and was deeply affected by her love for him. After enjoying the hospitality of his father-in-law for some days, he returned to Delhi accompanied by his favourite queen, who told him after some days that it was Birbal who had guided her and showed her the trick.

The Badshah and the queen conferred much honour on Birbal in the presence of a gathering of distinguished men and officers of the State.

XXX

Who Is Blind ?

' **B**irbal ! ' said the Badshah one day, ' if you take the census of the blind men in the world, do you think they would outnumber those who can see ? '

' Your Majesty ! ' replied Birbal, ' if we consider the question critically, we shall find that blind men will easily outnumber those who can see.'

' Can you furnish a convincing proof to support your assertion ? '

' I shall do it to-morrow, Your Majesty ! '

The next day Birbal went to the palace with a frame of wooden cot and a bundle of strings. He requested the Badshah to accompany him to

the river-side where he would show him that the number of blind men in the world was far larger than that of those who could see.

On reaching the river, Birbal put the cot on the ground and began to set it with lengthwise and breadthwise rows of string. The Badshah who was filled with astonishment at the strange behaviour of Birbal asked him impatiently what he was doing.

At once Birbal said to his clerk, 'Please put the Emperor's name at the top of the list of blind men.' The clerk did as he was told. In a short time, a large number of men gathered there including noblemen, officers, sardars, business men and others. All of them put the same questions to Birbal. Whoever set this question was enlisted by the clerk as a blind man. Whoever asked the question, 'Are you preparing the cot to-day for a bed?' was entered in the list of those who could see. The process went on for about an hour, during which time five hundred names were included in the list of blind men and only one hundred in the list of those who could see.

At the end of one hour, Birbal submitted both the lists to the Badshah, who, seeing his

name at the top of the list of blind men, exclaimed, 'How is it that you have regarded me as a blind man ?'

'Your Majesty !' answered Birbal with folded hands, 'when I began the work, you saw what I was doing, yet you inquired of me what I was doing. Is this not a mark of blindness ? I have got two lists, one of those who can see and the other of those who cannot see, though they have eyes. The number of blind men is five times that of those who can see.'

The Badshah wondered at the intelligence of Birbal and invited him to dinner in the palace.

A Colony Of Idlers

One day the Badshah caused a proclamation to be made that all the idlers residing in the city of Delhi would be fed, clothed and housed at the expense of the State. This led to a number of people neglecting their daily useful work and swelling the crowds of idlers. The Emperor could see his mistake, because most of the people were prone to idleness and their normal activities were about to come to a stand-still. It is a tendency prevailing among human beings to avoid work, should they get food and clothes without physical or mental labour. The Badshah was charged with encouraging sloth and lethargy. He at last asked Birbal to distinguish the inborn from the pretending idlers.

Birbal had his own way of dealing with the

situation. He at once ordered a large number of straw-huts to be constructed on the bank of the river. All idlers were ordered to occupy them.

This colony of idlers was a sight to see. It was their business only to shun business. They would devote all their time to idle talk, sleeping and doing nothing. Some of them would even take their meals while lying on the ground. Birbal ordered the whole colony of idlers to be set on fire. As soon as the huts caught fire, the idlers ran away from the place, lest they should be burnt alive. There remained only two confirmed idlers who did not shake off their idleness and leave the burning hut. Birbal caused them to be dragged out of their huts and produced them before the Badshah, saying, 'These two are the only inborn idlers.'

The Badshah was pleased at the trick of Birbal and honoured him publicly.

I Shall Do All Talking

One day Birbal entered the retiring chamber of Akbar, as he had some urgent work. The Badshah who did not like anybody to encroach on his privacy, angrily said, 'Why have you come here at this odd hour ?'

'Your Majesty !' replied Birbal, 'I have to ask Your Majesty something about an important matter.'

'Birbal !' I have no time to talk to you at present. Put it off till to-morrow', said the Emperor impatiently.

'It does not matter. Your Majesty need not worry about it. I shall do all talking myself. You have simply to listen to my talk.'

The Badshah laughed at this witty answer and was pleased to give him audience.

XXXIII

In Charge Of Dogs !

One day Abul Fazal, one of the ministers of Akbar, said to Birbal in the presence of Akbar, 'Birbal ! His Majesty has been pleased to appoint you officer in charge of the dogs residing in our State with effect from to-day.'

'That's nice,' replied Birbal, 'because to-day you will also be in my charge.'

The Badshah burst into laughter at this shot which silenced Abul Fazal once for all.

XXIV

What Next ?

One day the Badshah learnt from somebody that Birbal had attended a dinner party at the place of a relative. When he came to the court the Badshah asked him what he had dined there. Birbal gave him an exaggerated idea of the picturesque scene at the party and then began to give a vivid description of multiple items of the dish served on the table. The Badshah listened to him quietly. He interrupted him repeatedly, saying, 'What next ?' The description remained incomplete because of some unforeseen circumstances that cropped up accidentally.

The Badshah forgot the matter altogether and a considerable time passed away. One day he remembered the incident all of a sudden. With the object of testing the retentive capacity

of Birbal. he said, ' What next, Birbal ? '

Birbal at once replied, ' What next ? Why it was curry. '

The Emperor was much impressed with his keen retentive ability and presented him with a pearl necklace.

Some sycophantic courtiers who saw this incident thought that the Emperor must have a special liking for curry and that was the reason why he presented Birbal with a pearl necklace, as soon as he uttered the word 'curry'. They therefore guessed that if they prepared savoury curry and took it to the Badshah, he would certainly give them a Jagir as a royal gift. The next day they got tasty curry prepared by clever cooks and caused it to be conveyed to the palace in a big vessel by coolies. The vessel was placed near the main gate of the palace and the coolies were allowed to return home.

Each of them filled a small vessel with curry, placed it on his head and went into the presence of the Badshah in procession.

' What is this ? ' said the Emperor, who was much surprised at this awkward sight.

'Your Majesty !' replied the wisest of them,

' we have brought you very tasty curry, as you have a special liking for it.'

The Badshah got wild with them. He ordered them to be hand-cuffed and imprisoned, saying: 'Why are you so jealous of Birbal? You heard the word 'curry' from his lips and saw that I awarded a prize to him. This incident tempted you to imitate him blindly with the desire of receiving a prize from me. You ought to have known that Birbal used that word with reference to a previous context.

The courtiers repented of their folly and lay prostrate before the Badshah and begged his pardon for their conduct resulting from greed and jealousy.

XXXV

Rama or Akbar ?

One day the Badshah sent for Birbal and said, 'Hindus write the name of Rama at the top of their writings. I pass an order to the effect that from to-day they must write my name instead of that of Rama.'

'It is a laudable idea,' replied Birbal calmly; 'but there is a difficulty in introducing this innovation. When the name of Rama is uttered, even stones float on the water—such a charm it has! Are you sure that they will behave in like manner when your name is mentioned?'

On hearing this answer, Akbar dropped the idea of issuing such an order.

XXXVI

A Strange Wedding

One day Akbar got so angry with Birbal that he suspended him from the royal court for a trivial offence. Birbal therefore left Delhi and took his abode in a distant country where the king was kind enough to give him refuge. He was treated as a royal guest and was much looked after.

Akbar did without his minister for some days, but then he began to feel the pangs of separation from him. He sent out messengers to all parts of the continent to find him out, but could not get any trace of the lost minister. At last he made a plan to know his whereabouts. He addressed letters to all the kings of Asia, saying: 'I am glad to inform you that the wedding of our river has been fixed to take

place some time next month. I therefore request you to send your rivers to Delhi to attend the wedding party.'

No king could respond to the invitation of Akbar, but the king who received Birbal in his court wrote: 'All our rivers are ready to come there. Please send your wells here to escort them to Delhi.'

Akbar was convinced by this reply that none else than Birbal could display such extraordinary intelligence in drafting such a reply. He at once sent a delegation to the court of that king with a request to Birbal to return to Delhi. Birbal gladly complied with the request and returned to Delhi amid cheers of all.

XXXVII

Whose Fault ?

Once the Badshah promised to give a jagir to Birbal. He did not fulfil the promise for a long time. When Birbal reminded him of the promise, he simply shrugged his shoulders.

Birbal kept mum at the time. One day they went out for a walk and chanced to see a camel. 'Birbal !' said the badshah, 'why is the neck of the camel curved ?'

'Your Majesty !' replied Birbal, 'he must have promised to give a Jagir to somebody, but now he goes back upon his word by shrugging his shoulders, in consequence of which his neck has become curved.'

This shrewd reply reminded the Badshah of his promise. He was ashamed of his conduct and bestowed a large jagir on Birbal.

XXXVIII

A Chip Of the Old Block

All the members of Birbal's family were kept in the imperial palace as guests on some auspicious occasion. They passed their time happily there in eating, drinking and merry-making.

One morning Birbal's daughter was taking her bath, keeping her clothes outside the bath-room. Akbar happened to come there.

On seeing her clothes, he paused there, picked them up and sat in a corner to see the fun.

Having finished her bath, the girl came out of the bath-room and found to her astonishment that her clothes were missing. She looked around and saw the Emperor, sitting in a corner with her clothes. She was put out of countenance

by the presence of the Emperor and instantly covered her breasts by her hands. She approached the Emperor in this fashion and demanded her clothes.

Wondering at her behaviour, the Badshah said to her, 'Why are you behaving thus ?'

'Your Majesty !' replied the girl, 'I can't explain my conduct. I am rather ashamed. You saw the whole of my body in my childhood, while I was playing on your lap; but you could not see my breasts at that time. Hence the necessity of covering them.'

Thus Badshah was much delighted to hear her explanation and was convinced that she had inherited all the intellectual qualities of her father. She gave her a handsome present, saying, 'It is no wonder that children generally take after their parents.'

XXXIX

A Waxen Prince

On one occasion, the Badshah grew sceptical about the authenticity of certain anecdotes connected with the life of Lord Krishna. He said to Birbal, 'I can't believe in certain stories related about the life of the Hindu God, Lord Krishna. Had he, for instance, no servant under him, so that He Himself came out running on hearing the trumpet of an elephant?'

'Your Majesty!' answered Birbal, 'I shall reply to this question afterwards.'

The next day, Birbal called on the servant who was in charge of the up-bringing of the Emperor's grand-son. After a preliminary talk to him he gave him a waxen statue resembling

the grand-son, and said, ' When the Badshah is taking a walk in the garden in the afternoon, you also go there with this waxen baby in the prince's clothes. While he catches a glimpse of you, you should fall into a water tank nearby, as if you had met with an accident. '

The servant promised to carry out all the instructions of Birbal to his satisfaction.

In the afternoon, Akbar and Birbal began to take a stroll in the garden, discussing the affairs of the State. While moving about, Akbar's eyes fell on the servant of his house-hold with the baby in arms. An intense desire to fondle the child was awakened in him at the sight of his grand-son. He was about to call out to the servant, when the latter slipped into a water tank with the child. The Badshah who feared that his grand-son would be drowned in the tank ran to his rescue, leaped into the tank and brought out the waxen child.

Birbal too ran after the Emperor and said to him, ' Have you no servants so that you yourself ran to this place and jumped into the tank ? O Fountain of Grace ! This is all due to the compelling power of love. As you bear

profound love for your progeny, Lord Krishna too has the same sort of love for his sincere devotees.'

The Badshah remembered the question he had put to Birbal on the previous day, and was fully satisfied with the reply he got just now.

XL

The Objects of Hatred

‘**B**irbal!’ said the Emperor one day, ‘who is fit to be held in contempt in our society?’

‘Your Majesty!’ replied Birbal, ‘the following should be the objects of hatred in our society: a dealer in bones, a gambler, a debauch, a fool, a mean-minded fellow, a rusted dagger, a ride in a bullock-cart on a rugged road, a selfish leader, a fox-hunter and a prostitute.’

The Badshah was impressed with the wisdom conveyed by this exhaustive list of objects fit to be hated by all decent people.

XLI

A Contest of wit

One day when Birbal was absent from the royal court, some courtiers who could not bear the glory of Birbal, said to the Badshah 'Your Majesty! we have no opportunity of rendering any services to you, because you entrust Birbal with all tasks demanding intelligence. Will you not be kind enough to set us some tasks?'

'I don't set you any tasks, because you are not so skilful as he is,' replied the Badshah.

'What is the ground for such a belief?' said all of them with one voice. 'Please give us a chance to display our intellectual powers and you will see that we are in no way inferior to your favourite minister'

Thereupon the Badshah asked his servants

to bring him a piece of cloth two and a half feet in length. When the piece of cloth was brought there, he said to the courtiers, 'I now lie on the bed and you should cover my whole body with this cloth.'

He then lay at full length on the bed, but who could cover his whole body with a piece of cloth only thirty inches in length? While they tried to cover up the head, legs would lie uncovered. If they tried to cover up the legs, the head would remain uncovered. All of them tried their skill, but all their efforts met with failure. Seeing that they were unsuccessful in the task entrusted to them, the Badshah summoned Birbal to the court. When Birbal arrived on the scene, he was made familiar with the whole situation. All were eager to see how Birbal tackled the problem.

Birbal went near the cot on which the Badshah was lying. He doubled up the Emperor's legs so as to make his body occupy much smaller space than it would otherwise do. He then covered it up with the piece of cloth.

'Birbal!' said the Badshah, 'Why have you doubled up my legs?'

‘ Your Majesty ! ’ replied Birbal, ‘ we have a proverb: ‘ We should stretch our legs according to the length of the covering cloth.’

The Badshah was pleased at the trick of Birbal and all courtiers were convinced that they were not fit to hold a candle to the distinguished minister of Akbar.

XLII

A Nymph & A Witch

One day Akbar expressed his keen desire to see a nymph and a witch. 'Your Majesty!' said Birbal, 'I shall produce them here in no time.'

With these words he went home. After a while, he returned to the court, accompanied by his wife and a beautiful harlot. Producing them before the Badshah, he said respectfully, 'Here is my wife whom I regard as a nymph. She looks after my domestic affairs and serves me as an obedient wife should do. You will hardly find any woman who can stand comparison with her in point of beauty.'

'Birbal!' said the Badshah, 'she has a dark complexion. A nymph must be fair in appearance.'

‘Your Majesty!’ retorted Birbal quickly, ‘virtue and not mere complexion should be the essence of beauty. Measured by this yard-stick, she is a nymph beyond a shadow of doubt. As a wife she gives me heavenly happiness into the bargain.’

‘I concur with you in this matter, but where is the witch?’ inquired the Emperor.

Pointing to the fair-looking harlot, Birbal answered, ‘This is a witch. She robs whoever falls into her clutches of whatever he possesses, and when she has extorted the last pie out of his pocket, she throws him away like a squeezed orange. Though possessed of great personal charm, is she not a witch fit to be burnt alive in the heart of the town?’

The Badshah was more than satisfied with the reply and returned all of them with precious gifts.

XLIII

A Crucial Test

Once upon a time King Rohsen of Malyal addressed the following letter to Emperor Akbar: 'Please find out and send me at an early date the following four things, or be prepared for war: A person who is low, though of high birth; a person who is noble, though of low descent; a street dog, and an ass sitting on the throne.'

The Badshah read the letter and thought within himself that all the things asked for were impossible of attainment and that there was no escape from war, though it would entail a heavy loss of life and property.

He sent for his minister to see if there was any way out of the tangle. Birbal was sorry to read the signs of worry and anxiety on the face

of the Badshah who acquainted him with the letter and said, 'Your Majesty ! all these things cannot be produced without a considerable time. Let us therefore write to the king that we would send them to him within a year. This reply having been despatched, Birbal said, 'We should spare no efforts to obtain these four things as early as possible, because time is fleeting.'

'Quite so,' answered the Badshah, 'I entrust this responsible task to you, because it is beyond the capacity of other courtiers.'

Birbal gladly undertook the work and demanded a sum of a lakh of rupees for expenditure on it. The Badshah was pleased to sanction the money. He ordered the treasurer to give money to Birbal without any loss of time.

The next day Birbal took leave of Badshah and set out for Malyal in the guise of a Shahukar on a horse of the purest Arab blood. He reached his destination in a few days and rented a luxurious bungalow in a thoroughfare which was the most fashionable locality in the whole town. He set up as a banker and money-lender on a large scale.

Just in front of his bungalow, there lived the

Police Commissioner of the city in Police Headquarters. Birbal made friends with him and invited him to dinner off and on. He was a past-master in the art of pleasing others by his acquaintance.

Thus the ties of friendship between the two were cemented and the Police Commissioner was prepared to do everything for the rich Shahukar, as the proverb says: 'Money is a key that will open every door.'

Birbal arranged a variety of social functions, musical concerts and dinner parties. The Police Commissioner was not only invariably present at each of these functions, but also he rendered active help to make it a grand success. If a star of music happened to pay a visit to that city, he would take him to Birbal for introduction and encouragement. Birbal would arrange a concert of music and give him a suitable reward, as advised by the Police Commissioner.

One day the Police Commissioner brought before Birbal a young songstress of bewitching beauty and engaging manners. She was an adept in music and dancing.

“ Sir ! ” said he to Birbal, “ this woman sings more melodiously than a cuckoo, and if you don't mind, she may stage a concert of music and dance to please you by her exquisite art. Birbal was pleased to see her and allowed her to stage a concert in their presence.

The fascinating dancer sang and danced so exquisitely that all were spell-bound as it were. At the end of the concert, Birbal acting on the advice of his friend, gave her two hundred rupees in appreciation of her marvellous artistic talents.

The woman who had never received such a rich gift before was exceedingly pleased with the generosity of Birbal. Glancing at Birbal she said, “ You are the first person to recognise my talents. Why should I wander from place to place in search of two-penny worth customers ? It is better to serve a wise man like you than a number of fools. I lay myself at your feet. Pray accept my services and I shall never forget my debt of gratitude to you.”

The sweet silvery tone of the woman appealed to the heart of Birbal who answered, “ If you are moved by feelings of divine love for me and take a solemn vow to follow me

through thick and thin, I am prepared to accept you as my spouse. You can gladly stay with me and ask for whatever you want."

Rambha, for that was the name of the glamorous woman, caught hold of Birbal's hand and took him to her residence in her chariot. They passed the night there in merry-making. In the morning the Shahukar returned home to the grief of his beloved. While parting with her with a heavy heart, Birbal promised to pay regular visits to her and extend whatever help she needed.

Thus Birbal returned home and from that time onwards it was a regular part of his daily routine to visit the house of Rambha and spend a few hours in her sweet company.

One day the Police Commissioner asked Birbal whether he was married or single. Birbal replied, 'I have a mind to wed a girl of high descent, if I get one; or else I will remain a life-long bachelor.'

After some days, the Police Commissioner found out a glamorous girl of high birth and Birbal accepted her in marriage. The wedding was celebrated with pomp and pageantry,

After his wedding with Manorama, Birbal made it a rule of his life to deliver a blow of lash on her back everyday before going out of the house. This savage practice went on for a number of days, but the poor victim of whipping did not utter a single word of protest against it.

One day Birbal purchased a ripe melon from the Bazaar, cut it into two halves and wrapped them up in a handkerchief of a fading red colour. He came home running and said to Manorama angrily, 'Look here ! I have cut off the head of the Prince and brought it here. I enclose it in this box and lock it. I give you a stern warning against giving out this secret, lest you should meet with a similar fate.' He left his home with these words.

He had hardly gone a few yards, when his wife raised a hue and cry in the house. The Police Commissioner, hearing her cries of alarm rushed to the spot with a party of armed police constables. Manorama said to him, 'You have ruined my life by giving me in marriage to this beast. How can I explain my true condition ? Your friend has murdered the Prince and put his head into that box under lock and key. He also flogged me severely on

the back, lest I should report the matter to anybody else.'

The Police Commissioner was much distressed at this news. He said to himself, 'This incident proves conclusively that this man is a rogue in white. He is a predatory beast. He should be heavily punished for his rapacity and savagery. Did he wed a noble girl for perpetrating such horrible atrocities on her? Fie on that bestial savage!'

He at once ordered his police constables to arrest the Shahukar and produce him before him. The policemen searched him out and handcuffed him. They beat him severely and dragged him to the Police Commissioner.

Birbal cried out, 'Why do you beat an innocent person like myself? What crime have I committed to merit this punishment?'

The Police Commissioner lost his temper and said furiously, 'Shut up, you scoundrel! Don't make an exhibition of yourself. I had not got the faintest idea about your beastly behaviour. You will presently reap the fruits of your misdeeds.'

He then took him into the presence of the King under strict police vigilance. He said to

the King, 'Your Highness ! This devil has cut off the head of the Prince and locked it in a box, flogging his wife serverely, lest she should give out the truth'

The King was wild with anger, and without instituting any inquiry into the report, he ordered the accused to be hanged. As soon as the death sentence was pronounced by the King, the Police Commissioner asked his men to drag him to the place of execution. On the way, the Shahukar saw his servant to whom he said, 'Go and inform your mistress that I am being taken to the gallows. Return to me with the reply, she gives you.

The servant went home and related the whole account to Manorama who was not at all moved by this sad news. She said, 'Let him go to the dogs. As he sows, so shall he reap. How can I help him ?'

The servant conveyed the reply of his mistress to Birbal who again said to him, " Now go and inform Rambha that I am just coming to her place." As soon as Rambha received this message, she made preparations for the reception of the distinguished guest, and stood in the balcony, overlooking the public road, anxiously waiting for his arrival.

Birbal told the Police Commissioner that he would be much obliged to him, if they passed by the house of Rambha. The Police Commissioner was kind enough to grant his request. Rambha saw them at a distance and was overpowered with mercy. She came down and learnt from the police authorities the causes leading to the sorry plight of the Sheth. She put two hundred rupees on the palm of the Police Commissioner, saying, 'I shall thank you, if you kindly wait under the shade of this tree for an hour. I am just going to the King to request him to grant pardon to your prisoner. If I fail in my mission, you proceed with his execution.'

The Police Commissioner granted the request of Rambha, as she had greased his palm.

Rambha put on her choicest garment and ornaments and went to the royal court. She paid her respectful homage to the King, and bewitched him by her amorous gestures, dance and music. The King who was spell-bound by the glamour of Rambha said, 'You may ask whatever you want. I will fulfil your desire.' Rambha requested him to condone the offence

of the Shahukar and to set aside the death sentence passed on him.

The King accordingly passed orders for the unconditional release of the rich man. The Police Commissioner obeyed the royal orders and restored freedom to his old friend.

Rambha pressed the hand of the Sheth and led him to her house with tears of joy in her eyes. She pleased him with her love and hospitality, and asked him how he was involved in that trouble.

Birbal said, 'Darling! don't be anxious about me. I have created this situation for some secret reason. Now I say farewell to you and go to my country for a short time. I will return here shortly, wind up my business and then all of us shall go to my native place.'

This news came to Rambha as a bolt from the blue. She was stunned for a while, but Birbal soothed her grief by words of comfort. When Rambha recovered from the shock, he bade her good-bye and they parted with heavy hearts.

Birbal arrived in Delhi and informed Akbar that he had obtained all the four things demanded by the King of Malyal.

The Badshah was delighted to hear this news. He asked Birbal where those things were. 'They are in the capital of the King,' replied Birbal. 'Please give me my credentials bearing your signature and telling the King that I am sent to him with all the four things he had asked for.'

The Badshah wrote a letter to that effect, signed it and sealed it. He handed it to Birbal.

Birbal accompanied by a large retinue went to Malyal. He sent intimation to the Kingth that he had come there with a sealed letter from Akbar to be handed to him in person. The King called him into his presence. Birbal paid his respects to him and presented his credentials. The King read the letter and asked Birbal to produce those four things before him. Birbal replied that he would do so in a moment. Turning to his old servant, he asked him to go and bring Manorama and Rambha to the court.

When they arrived, Birbal said to the King, 'I resided in your town in the guise of a banker just opposite the Police Headquarters. The Police Commissioner cultivated friendly relations with me and got me married to this woman, Manorama by name. She is a woman

of noble birth. I wanted to put her nobility to the test. So one day I bought a ripe melon, cut it into two and wrapped it up in a handkerchief of fading red colour. I took it home and told my wife that I had brought the head of the Prince. I warned her against the leakage of the secret and then went out on business. She raised a hue and cry over the murder and reported the matter to the Police Commissioner, who brought me here for punishment. My wife was glad to hear that I was condemned to death, and heaved a sigh of relief instead of trying to save my life. **She is therefore low, though of a high family.**

The King was satisfied with the first thing and asked for the second.

Birbal continued, 'This Rambha who is a professional singer and dancer is considered low by our society, but she bears genuine love for me. When she knew that I was going to be hanged, she wept oceans of tears and you know how she saved by life. **She is therefore noble, though of a low family.**'

'I agree with you,' said the King; 'where is the third thing?'

'The police Commissioner, sitting in front of

you is a Street Dog,' replied Birbal.

'Am I a street dog?' said the Police Commissioner with his hand on the sword.

'Yes, I can substantiate my statement!' answered Birbal. 'It is the habit of a dog to serve his master so long as he gets crumbs of bread from him. You posed to be by bosom friend, but did you care to examine the validity of the report made to you by Manorama? Did you see the Prince's head in the box? You simply got me arrested and belaboured by your men. You exposed me to humiliation, forgetting our past relations. Instead of trying to dispel the clouds of misery overhanging my head, you proved faithless to me and degraded yourself to the level of a dog for a paltry prize from the King. Does this not prove clearly that he is a street dog, Your Highness?'

The King accepted the truth of the statement and asked Birbal to point out the fourth thing.

'Excuse me if I am discourteous to Your Highness. Now I have to show an ass sitting on a throne. I apply this epithet to Your Highness.'

'How?' said the King rising from the throne with his hand on the sword.

'Your Highness!' answered Birbal quietly,

‘ without inquiring into to the nature of the alleged crime, you relied on the report of your mean and selfish Polish Commissioner and sentenced me to death. Had you inquired whether the Prince was living or dead ? Your judgment based on a false report proves that you are an **Ass on the Throne**. Thus I have shown you all the four things you asked for. Kindly accept them and pass a receipt for the cognizance of Emperor Akbar, so that I may return to Delhi. ’

The King of Malyal was deeply impressed with the exalted genius and cleverness of Birbal. He held a public reception of the ditinguished visitor and conferred priceless gifts and honours on him. After staying in the palace of the King as his guest, he returned to Delhi, when the King and his courtiers gave him a hearty send-off.

Birbal returned to Delhi with both Rambha and Manorama who turned over a new leaf after this incident.

Akbar received him in audience and heard the whole story of his achievements. The Badshah was transported with joy on hearing it and gave him a vast zagir free of tax. Birbal thanked God for his passing through the fiery ordeal.

XLIV

A Set of Questions

One day the Badshah came to the court before other courtiers and resolved to set five questions to every courtier. The courtiers began to come one by one. The first to arrive there was a Sardar named Anvarkhan. The Badshah said to him, 'Anvarkhan ! will you answer my five questions ?

' Your Majesty ! ' replied the Sardar, ' I shall, if I can.'

The Badshah set the following questions:

- (1) Which is the best flower ?
- (2) Who has the best teeth ?
- (3) Whose son is the greatest of all ?
- (4) Who is the greatest king ?
- (5) Which is the noblest virtue ?

Anvarkhan thought that it was beyond his capacity to answer those difficult questions. He therefore said, 'Your Majesty! my answers may be erroneous. As I don't like to give faulty answers, it would be proper, if I answer them after consulting my fellow--courtiers.

The Badshah agreed to this suggestion. All courtiers came there, but Birbal was detained at home by some private piece of work.

In consultation with his colleagues, Anvarkhan reached the solution of the questions. He stood up and said to the Badshah, 'Your Majesty! I have found out the answers to Your Majesty's questions. I may submit them, if permitted by Your Majesty.'

The permission being granted, he said, 'Your Majesty! (1) The **Jai** is the best flower. (2) The Elephant has the best set of teeth. (3) The king's son is the greatest of all. (4) A sovereign is the greatest king. (5) Lastly, learning is the noblest virtue.'

The courtiers had no doubt about the correctness of those answers, but they were taken by surprise when the Badshah rejected them.

In the meantime Birbal arrived there. The Badshah put the same questions to him. He readily answered: ' (1) The cotton-flower is the best one, for it provides clothes to mankind. (2) The plough has the best tooth, for it cultivates land which produces corn to feed the world. (3) The cow's son (an ox) is the greatest of all; for it draws the plough and tills the land. (4) Indra is the greatest king, for he sends rain, on which crops and vegetations depend. (5) Lastly, courage is the noblest virtue, for God is always on the side of the courageous.

Akbar was fully satisfied with these answers and all the courtiers admired the talented minister.

XLV

Who Should Break The News?

Once there was a religious festival, when a faquir came to the court and presented a nice-looking parrot to the Badshah. He was taught to talk and utter certain significant phrases. The Badshah took a fancy to him and entrusted him to the care of a domestic servant. He also warned him that he should be taken good care of and if he felt uneasy, the matter should be immediately reported to him, but that if anybody conveyed to him the news of the parrot's death, his head would be chopped off.

The poor servant took great care of the parrot and regarded his soul as his own. But as the luck would have it, the parrot died unexpectedly, and the servant feared that he would lose his head, if he conveyed this news

to the Emperor. He was utterly at a loss to understand what to do, when he saw Birbal enter the palace. He approached him, lay prostrate before him and entreated him to save his life.

Birbal consoled him and undertook to convey the news to the Emperor. He approached the Badshah and said, 'Your Majesty ! our parrot.....'

'Has he died ?' inquired the Badshah.

'No, Your Majesty ! how can he die ? He is a great ascetic. At present he is engrossed in deep meditation. He is sitting with his face towards the sky, his beak and eyes closed and wings unmoving. He is in a trance, as it were.'

'Then why don't you say that he is dead ?' said the Emperor.

'Your Majesty !' answered Birbal, 'Whatever it may be, I am afraid that he is performing penance. Will Your Majesty go there and see him in person ?'

The Badshah agreed to do so. He accompanied Birbal to the cage of the parrot. Seeing him dead, the Badshah cried out, 'Birbal ! it is a wonder that a learned man of your type could not know whether he was dead or in a trance.'

Does this not tarnish your reputation for omniscience? Had you informed me of his death there and then, I would have been spared the trouble of coming here.'

Birbal said with folded hands, 'Had I broken the news of the parrot's death to you, you would have beheaded me.'

The Badshah remembered his original warning and thanked Birbal for the tact he used in dealing with this situation.

XLVI
A Battle of Wits

One day the Darbar was held. Sweet music was being played by the state musicians, and all were in a happy mood. At that time a foreign Pundit, who had come to Delhi for a brief visit entered the court with the permission of the Badshah. He too enjoyed the music and gossips of the courtiers for some time. Then he stood up and said to Akbar, 'Your Majesty ! I wish to put some questions to the courtiers present here, if I am permitted.'

'You can do so without any hesitation. I have no objection to it.'

'Your Majesty ! said the Pundit, ' one courtier is to answer one question. If he cannot answer it correctly, he cannot attempt another.'

The Emperor granted his request and the Pundit began: 'What should a man do in his youth ?'

One courtier answered, 'He should perform good deeds.'

'No,' said the Pundit, 'that's not right. He should perform good deeds at every stage of his life.'

'He should live in conformity with the will of God,' said another.

The Pundit did not accept even this answer with the result that other courtiers thought it wise to remain silent, lest their shallowness should be exposed. They were certain that Birbal or Jagannath Pundit would be able to give correct answers. As Jagannath Pundit was absent from the Darbar that day, the duty to answer the questions devolved on Birbal. He at once stood up and answered, 'Pundit, in youth man should devise means of attaining happiness in old age.'

The Pundit accepted this answer and then the following battle of wits took place between the giants of intellect:

Pundit:--What is it that comes late and goes early ?

Birbal:--Teeth. They come after birth and go before death.

Pundit:--What is it that cannot be destroyed ?

Birbal:--Good name.

Pundit:--Point out two things which cannot meet each other in spite of their proximity.

Birbal:--Eyes. Though they are near each other, they are separated by the nose, and so they can never meet.

Pundit:--What is the key to happiness ?

Birbal:--Contentment.

Pundit:--Which article is very precious and praiseworthy ?

Birbal:--A product of hand-craft.

Pundit:--Which is the best occupation ?

Birbal:--Agriculture is the best of all occupations, for it supports the lives of all human beings.

Pundit:--Who is a fool ?

Birbal:--One who does not know one's own interest.

Pundit:--What is the root cause of quarrel ?

Birbal:--A jest.

Pundit:--What is it that influences its neighbours and makes them like itself.

Birbal:--Sandal-wood.

Pundit:--When is a work done satisfactorily?

Birbal:--When we do it personally.

The Pundit was greatly pleased with the appropriate answers given by Birbal to all his questions, and acknowledged his defeat at the hands of the latter. Akbar was filled with joy and gave suitable rewards to both the combatants.

XLVII

Whose Servant ?

‘**B**irbal,’ said the Badshah one day, ‘a dish of fried potatoes is very tasty. I like it very much.’

‘That is why it is universally used,’ answered Birbal.

After some days Akbar began to disparage the vegetable of potatoes. Birbal agreed with him saying, ‘Your Majesty ! No vegetable is so bad as potatoes. It creates gas in the stomach and upsets the whole system.’

On hearing this Akbar said, ‘Birbal ! you are a rank-liar. You extolled it the other day, and now you blow hot and cold in the same breath. How can you explain this inconsistency ?’

Birbal replied humbly, ' Your Majesty ! do me justice. Whose servant am I-Your Majesty's or of potatoes ? '

' Of course, mine. ' replied Badshah.

' I owe allegiance to Your Majesty, and should always try to humour Your Majesty. '

The Badshah laughed loudly at this answer.

XLVIII

Who Is Wise ?

One day the Badshah said to Birbal, ' How will you distinguish between a fool and a wise man ? '

' Your Majesty ! ' answered Birbal, ' one who succeeds in his undertaking is regarded as wise and learned, while one who abandons something unfinished is regarded as mad and foolish. '

The Emperor was pleased to hear this answer and praised the cleverness of Birbal.

XLIX

Three Questions

Once Akbar said to Birbal, 'When does a betel decay? When is the loaf of bread scorched? Why does a horse stop running all of a sudden?'

Birbal gave one answer to all these three questions. He said, 'Without the practice of turning.'

The Badshah was deeply impressed with this clever answer.

L

Darkness In Light

‘**B**irbal!’ said the Badshah one day, ‘everything can be seen in the light of the sun. Is there anything which cannot be seen in the sun-light?’

‘Yes, Your Majesty!’ replied Birbal, ‘darkness cannot be seen in the light of the sun.’

A Jest Recoils Upon The Jester

Once the Badshah said to Birbal, 'I had a wonderful dream last night. I dreamt that I slipped into a tank of scented oils, and can you imagine where you fell?'

'No, Your Majesty' replied Birbal.

'It was a sewage tank into which you fell,' said the Badshah.

'I had also a similar dream,' said Birbal, 'but there was something more in it.'

'What was it?'

'In the dream, I saw that I was licking Your Majesty's body and Your Majesty was licking mine.'

Thus the jest recoiled upon the Badshah who deemed it wise to keep silent.

Four In One

One day the Badshah said, 'Birbal, fetch me four persons each of whom embodies one of the four qualities, viz, impudence, timidity, bashfulness and fearlessness.'

'I shall do it to-morrow,' answered Birbal.

The next day Birbal produced a woman before the Emperor and said, 'Your Majesty ! these four are the persons representing the four qualities mentioned by Your Majesty yesterday.'

'Birbal' said the Badshah, 'do you think that I am blind ? You have brought only one woman and claim that there are four persons.'

'O Protector of the Poor !' answered Birbal with confidence, 'all those four qualities inhere in the person of this woman. I shall explain the point more clearly. When this woman sings

indecent songs at the time of a wedding ceremony, she does not mind the presence of even her father or brother. Hence I call her **impudent**. When her husband asks her to enter a dark room for some work, she is trembling with fear. Hence she is **timid**. When she goes to her husband's house, she speaks gently and behaves modestly. Hence she is **bashful**. She goes out to meet her lover even in the pitch darkness without being daunted by ghosts, tigers or thieves. This is due to her **fearlessness**. Thus instead of bringing four persons symbolic of four different qualities, I have brought one in whom all the four qualities reside.'

The Badshah admitted the skill of Birbal and gave him a good reward.

LIII

A Cure For A Scorpion--Bite

One day some courtiers laid a wager with Birbal that if he kissed the Princess in the full Durbar, they would pay him ten thousand rupees. Birbal accepted the terms of the bet. The next day he went to the palace. He had a free access to all the apartments of the palace, as he was one of the trusted ministers of the State. He acquainted the Princess with what had taken place in the Durbar and sought her help. She was an innocent girl of fourteen. She said, 'Uncle ! how can you kiss me in the full Durbar ?'

Birbal revealed his plan to her and she agreed to follow his instructions.

On the following day, the Durbar was held and all the courtiers were present. By that time,

the Princess came there running and crying aloud. The Badshah asked her why she was crying so bitterly. She answered that she was stung by a scorpion on the cheek.

The Badshah was much affected by her pain and turning to the courtiers, he said, 'Does any one of you know a charm to nullify the effect of a scorpion-bite ?

'Your Majesty !' answered Birbal, 'I know a charm, but there is one difficulty in its usage. While the charm is recited the spot of bite has to be sucked. The Princess has been stung on the cheek; hence the situation has become very delicate.'

'That doesn't matter, Birbal;' said the Badshah; 'the Princess is still a child and you are her uncle. Kindly hurry up and squeeze out the poison by sucking.'

Birbal thereupon kissed her cheek for a number of times, winking at the courtiers at the same time. After a short time, the Princess said, 'I am all right now. The pain has disappeared.' Birbal stopped kissing her and looked triumphantly at the courtiers as the winner of the wager.

The courtiers said to the Badshah, 'We too

know that charm, but couldn't declare it for the sake of decency.'

'I am glad to know that,' answered Akbar, 'because I can utilize your services, should Birbal be away from the Durbar.'

The courtiers declined to pay the stipulated amount to Birbal, for a solved problem is worth a broken button. He was waiting for a chance to pay them in the same coin.

One day the Badshah and the courtiers went on a picnic. It was monsoon and there was green grass all around. Birbal sat down near a hedge to ease himself. Birbal at once cried out loudly that he was stung by a scorpion. The Badshah asked the courtiers to recite the charm and suck the spot of bite. The courtiers saw that they were reduced to a helpless condition by the masterly trick of Birbal. They therefore said to Badshah, 'Your Majesty! the scorpion has stung that part of the body which it is immoral and repugnant to suck.'

The Badshah could see that Birbal must have played a trick to set his detractors right. He harshly said, 'When there is the question of life and death, what is the use of talking about cannons of morality? It is a black sin to let

him die, when his life can possibly be saved by human efforts. So be quick and try the efficacious remedy for the bite.'

The courtiers could not argue any longer with the Badshah who was firm in his resolve. Birbal was crying aloud all the while, as if he were really stung by a scorpion. The courtiers finding themselves helpless before the creative genius of Birbal said, 'Your Majesty ! Though this is an immoral and indecent act, we shall perform it in pursuance of your command. One of us shall try the remedy just now.'

The leader of the party approached Birbal and he declared on oath that they would pay him twenty thousand rupees, if he relieved them from that delicate situation. Birbal complied with his request and told the Emperor that he was cured of the bite.

The Champa Flower

One summer evening Akbar and Birbal were taking a walk in the garden. There were countless sweet-smelling flowers on the plants, and trees were laden with fruit. Water-fountains spreading out drops of water presented a spectacular sight.

At that time the eyes of the Emperor fell on the bees sitting on the flowers to suck the juice from them. He noted that they sat on all flowers except the Champa which they avoided with scrupulous care. Akbar therefore said, 'Birbal ! can you say why the bees sit on all other flowers, but avoid the Champa ?'

'Yes, Your Majesty !' answered Birbal, 'one poet has composed a verse on this subject. It reads:

‘ Three qualities you have O Champa !
Beauty, smell and colour;
But you have a vice O Flower,
The bee remains away for ever ! ’

Another poet says that the Champa flower agrees with Radhika in point of colour, and as the bee is the worshipper of Hari, the husband of Radhika, he does not approach the Champa. This is all imagination of the poet, but the truth is that the smell of the Champa is so strong that the bee cannot bear it. That is why he keeps at a distance from it.’

This answer gave complete satisfaction to the Badshah.

LV

Without Brains

In his old age, the Badshah made use of the hair-dye to appear younger. One day he was busy applying the hair-dye to his hair, when Birbal came there. On seeing him, the Badshah said, 'Birbal! does the hair-dye do any harm to the brain?'

'Your Majesty!' answered Birbal, 'as the users of the hair-dye have no brains, the question of harm does not arise.'

'How can you say that they have no brains?' asked Akbar with surprise.

'Your Majesty!' replied Birbal, 'if they have brains would they fritter away their energy in a vain effort to regain youth and lost physical charm?'

Darkness Beneath A Lamp

One evening the Badshah and Birbal were sitting in a turret of the city walls. They were engaged in the discussion of state affairs. At that time, a rich merchant was being robbed by a gang of robbers beneath the turret. The Badshah witnessed this incident. The merchant looked at the Emperor and sought his help. He cried out, 'Robbers rob me under the nose of Your Majesty. They trot away merrily and yet Your Majesty does nothing to help me.'

The Badshah was enraged at this highway robbery. He said to Birbal. 'Do you keep such **bundobast** in my kingdom? Whenever I inquire about the maintenance of law and order, you say that all is quiet; but now I am convinced that you keep me in the dark about

the true state of affairs. I saw with my own eyes this merchant being robbed by seven ruffians.'

'Your Majesty!' said Birbal with folded hands; 'there is always darkness beneath the lamp. This is an old adage and its truth has universal validity. Your Majesty is sitting like a lamp of the Moghul dynasty on this turret; hence is it not natural that there may be darkness beneath Your Majesty? Your Majesty should please see if there is darkness all around or not.'

The Badshah was satisfied with this plausible answer. He ordered mounted guard to chase the robbers and produce them before him.

LVII

The Art Of Detecting Thieves

Once there was a big theft in a ship. The captain of the ship laid a number of plans to detect the thief, but he could not succeed. At last he gathered all the suspects and brought them before Akbar with a complaint against them. The Badshah gave him a patient hearing and entrusted Birbal with the duty of detecting the thief from among the crowd of suspects.

Birbal made a trick to find out the culprit. He caused some wheat flour to be brought there. He gave a handful of flour to each of the suspects and said, 'You are to moisten this flour with your own saliva and work it up into dough. When you do so, I shall be able to lay my hands on the culprit by means of my occult powers.'

All the suspects tried to moisten the flour with saliva except one whose secretion of saliva was dried up, when he heard the words of Birbal. He could not make the flour moist. Birbal saw him and considered him the real criminal. On being questioned he confessed the theft and showed the place where the stolen goods were concealed.

The Badshah was pleased with this novel device of catching thieves and gave a precious reward to Birbal for his meritorious services to him.

LVIII

Even Eyes May Be Falsified

A domestic servant of the harem, who was entrusted with the work of making the bed of Akbar, said to himself one day, 'His Majesty always takes me to task for my carelessness in tidying up the bed. This evening I should make it with meticulous care.' Saying so, he tidied up the room and made the bed as carefully as he could.

When the bed was ready, he again said to himself, 'The bed is very nice and soft. Will His Majesty get sleep on it or not? I should lie on it and see for myself how comfortable it is.'

He lay on the Emperor's bed and covered his body with a blanket. He was exhausted with the work of the whole day, and had never

lain on such a soft cosy bed. As soon as he lay on it, he fell fast asleep.

After some time, the queen came to the bed-room. Seeing somebody on the bed, she concluded that the Emperor must have fallen asleep after the day's hard work. She didn't deem it proper to disturb him in his sleep, but lay gently by his side.

Having finished his work, the Badshah retired to his bed-room, but was exasperated to see a man lying beside the Queen. He drew his sword and was about to kill him, when he recollected the words of wisdom uttered by Birbal, viz. 'Even one's eyes may be falsified.' He paused for a moment and said to himself, 'I should call Birbal just now and challenge him to prove the validity of his statement in the face of this positive ocular evidence.'

He went to the adjoining apartment and sent for Birbal there. He told him what had happened. Birbal said, 'Let us look into the matter.'

Both of them entered the bed-room. Birbal requested Akbar to stand behind a curtain. He then awakened the Queen. Pointing to the man

beside her, he said to her, 'Who is sharing Your Majesty's bed ?'

The Queen was angry at such a question. She said, 'Are you not ashamed of entering our chamber at such an awkward time ? How can you have the audacity to ask me who is sharing my bed ? You burden my husband with so much work and when he is taking rest, you come here to disturb him. Even I didn't disturb his sleep, when I found him asleep on my arrival here. Why do you come here and set me such a question ? You should be severely punished for encroaching upon our privacy. I shall lodge a complaint against you before the Emperor when he gets up.'

Birbal said, 'Excuse me, Your Majesty ! I have come here on urgent work. I have got to consult His Majesty just now in connection with important state business. Will Your Majesty retire to the adjoining chamber ?'

The Queen left the room immediately. Birbal uncovered the body of the servant who was in deep slumber. Birbal woke him up. He got up rubbing his eyes and jumped out of the bed. He was taken aback and did not know what to

speak. Birbal frowned on him and said; 'What were you doing here, you rogue ?'

'Your Excellency!' replied the man trembling with fear, 'I shall speak the truth. I was always reprimanded by His Majesty the Emperor for my carelessness in making the bed. This night I made it with special care and lay on it to see how it was. Being tired with the day's work, I was overpowered by sleep. Pray pardon my fault.'

Birbal asked him to go away from that room. The Badshah came out from his hiding and was fully satisfied that the statement of Birbal was quite true.

LIX

Half the Prize

A number of scholars, poets, musicians and painters would frequent the court of Akbar to display their talents and receive an adequate reward from the gracious Badshah. When Birbal came to Delhi for the first time to visit the Darbar, there was nobody to introduce him to the Emperor. He had a keen desire to dazzle Akbar with the light of his intelligence and earn a seat in the galaxy of his distinguished courtiers.

When he went to the Darbar Hall, he found that every new comer had to pay some silver to the gate-keeper for getting admission into the Darbar. On seeing him, the gate-keeper said, 'Where are you going ?'

'To the Darbar. I come from a distant place,' answered Birbal.

'That won't do. You can't go in so easily', said the man.

'What should I do to secure admission?' said Birbal.

'You have to gratify me before you can get in,' answered he.

'All right. You may please yourself and let me get in.'

'What will you give me?'

'I have nothing to give you at present. I will give you a part of what I get from the Badshah.'

'I must have half the prize you win in the court.'

'I agree to it.'

'Then you can go in. Don't forget the condition.'

Birbal went inside the Darbar Hall and entertained the Badshah by his witty anecdotes and jugglery of words. The Badshah was so pleased with him that he promised to give him a prize of his own choice.

'Your Majesty!' said Birbal, 'I seek no material benefit. If Your Majesty is pleased

with me, kindly sentence me to one hundred strokes of flogging.'

'Flogging!' exclaimed Akbar.

'Yes, Your Majesty,' answered Birbal.

'Are you mad? Who will ask for flogging as a prize?' said the Badshah.

'I know what I speak, Your Majesty! I am the first to choose such a prize,' answered Birbal.

'How is it possible? A criminal can be flogged? How can I order you to be flogged?' said the puzzled Emperor.

'Your Majesty told me to choose a prize. If I am not entitled to the prize of my choice, well, let me go home.'

Seeing that Birbal was firm in his resolve, Akbar asked his attendant to flog him lightly in order to keep his word. When fifty strokes were given, Birbal said, 'Tarry!'

'Can't you take it?' said the Emperor.

'That's not the case, Your Majesty!' replied Birbal, 'I have a partner in the prize. I am bound to share half the prize with him?'

'Where is he? He must be a silly goose like you.'

‘ He is standing at the gate of this Hall. I don’t know whether he is a fool or a knave. Perhaps Your Majesty knows him better than I do.’

‘ Call him here ’, said the Emperor.

‘ With Your Majesty’s permission I am just now bringing him here,’ said Birbal. He went out and returned with the gate-keeper.

‘ Where is your partner ?’ said Akbar.

‘ Here is he ’, replied Birbal, pointing to the gate-keeper.

‘ He is my usher. How can he be your partner ?’ inquired the Badshah.

‘ Your Majesty !’ replied Birbal respectfully, ‘ before I was permitted to come here, I had to promise him that I should give him one-half of what I receive here.’

‘ That means that he asked for a bribe,’ remarked the Badshah.

‘ He told me that it is a rule here,’ continued Birbal.

‘ Did he say that it is a rule here to exact a bribe ?’ asked the Emperor sternly.

‘ As he says, no outsider can visit the Darbar without giving a tip to this man.’

'Is this a fact?' said Akbar looking at the courtiers.

Some courtiers replied that they themselves had such an experience in the past.

'I see! Give him half the prize. Flog him severely,' said the Badshah to his attendant.

The gate-keeper was at a loss to understand what had happened. Birbal said to him, 'You claim one-half of my prize according to our contract. I have received the prize of one hundred strokes of flogging. I have received my portion of the prize. Now you will get yours.'

The gate-keeper got sound whipping and then he was punished with a heavy fine by the Badshah for accepting bribes.

The Badshah was so much pleased with the shrewdness and cleverness of Birbal that he conferred a handsome gift on him and appointed him a permanent member of his Darbar.

LX

Greater Than God

One day the Badshah wished to know who was the greater of the two—he himself or God.

‘Your Majesty is undoubtedly greater than God;’ replied Birbal, ‘for God cannot do what Your Majesty can do.’

‘Have you mortgaged your common sense? Do you mean to say that there is something which I and not God can do?’

‘Exactly, Your Majesty!’

‘There is nothing which God cannot do’, interrupted a courtier who was jealous of Birbal.

‘There is,’ answered Birbal.

‘It may be something wicked’, remarked another courtier.

‘Do you mean to say that our Emperor performs wicked deeds?’ said Birbal firmly.

‘No, not that. I referred to God’, answered he.

‘I was talking about something that our Badshah and not God can do. You talk of a wicked deed with reference to the same context. That implies that our Emperor does such deeds.’

The courtier who was cornered by the question of Birbal felt ashamed of his remarks. He said to Akbar, ‘Your Majesty! this was not the meaning at the back of my mind. I did not even imagine that such a meaning could be read into my remarks. I am so sorry for my words.’

‘All right, that doesn’t matter’, said the Badshah impatiently; ‘Birbal, without beating about the bush, tell me what it is that God cannot do.’

‘Can Your Majesty punish a man with deportment for life, if necessary?’ said Birbal.

‘Certainly. If there is a grave offence, I shall not hesitate to send the offender into exile.’

‘God cannot inflict such a punishment, even if He wills’, said Birbal.

‘Why not?’ said Akbar.

‘Because He is the King of the Universe. There is no land where the arm of his authority does not extend. Where can he send a man, if he wants to deport him? He cannot inflict penal banishment on any one, however grave an offence one may commit; for He does not know where to send him; whereas Your Majesty can mete out this punishment. That is why I say that there are some deeds which Your Majesty and not God can perform.

Akbar was greatly pleased with the answer and the courtiers who had tried to oppose him acknowledged their defeat.

A Cunning Tailor

One day while the Badshah and Birbal were engaged in a light talk, Birbal remarked; 'Some artisans are so cunning that in spite of our precautions they are sure to cheat us.'

'Should we keep a strict watch on them, they cannot cheat us,' affirmed the Badshah.

'I know of some goldsmiths and tailors who are sure to steal a few grains of gold or a foot of cloth, even though they may be supervised by a corps of watchmen,' said Birbal.

'But how would they steal it, if we give them as much as they barely need?' said Akbar.

'They have their tricks. Nobody can outwit them,' answered Birbal.

‘ I would like to try the experiment, ’ said the Badshah; ‘ I possess a silken fabric of rare quality. It is so small that it would be difficult to make even a blouse out of it for the Begum. If it is given to a tailor, how could he steal even an inch from it ?’

‘ Your Majesty ! ’ replied Birbal, ‘ I know a tailor named Gulab, who is so skilled that he will sew a blouse for the Begum Saheba out of that fabric and steal a small piece from it for himself.

‘ Then call him here, ’ ordered the Badshah. ‘ Let us test his cleverness. ’

Birbal sent a messenger to fetch the tailor.

When he arrived there, Birbal showed him the fabric and asked him whether he would be able to make a blouse from it.

‘ I must see the model after which it is to be made, ’ answered Gulab.

Thereupon he was shown the model. He took the the measure and said, ‘ I can do it. ’

‘ You will have to work in the Palace and stay here till the work is finished, ’ said the Emperor.

‘I should do so most willingly,’ answered the tailor.

‘When will you begin the work?’

‘From to-day, if Your Majesty wills it.’

A special room of the Palace was set apart for the tailor. All necessary tools were brought there. Three special officers were appointed to keep vigilance on the tailor and the entrance was guarded by two armed soldiers.

The tailor worked on the fabric for four days. On the fourth day his son Natha came there and said, ‘Father! You haven’t come home for the last four days. Mother is very angry with you.’

‘Shut up, you little rogue! This is the King’s Palace and not your home’, said Gulab angrily.

‘Whatever it may be, tell me when you will come home’, said the child rudely.

‘As soon as I finish this blouse. I think it will be ready in the evening.’

‘Why have you devoted four days to this work? You could have done it in two hours.’

‘You are a fool. You can’t understand it. This is not your mother’s blouse; it is to be worn by the Begum Saheba.’

‘ You talk as if you were the only clever tailor to do this work. ’

The officers and soldiers on duty laughed at this dialogue. The tailor lost his temper. He cried out: ‘ You silly ass ! Get away from here or I will break your neck. ’

‘ When you come home, you will see how mother breaks your neck. Yoo abuse me here, but if you abuse mother, it will go hard with you. ’

‘ **Leave** this place or you are a dead man ! ’ said the tailor.

‘ All right. I shall **live** here if you ask me, ’ answered the boy smiling.

The tailor was so wild with rage at the rude behaviour of his son that he took his shoe lying beside him and hurled it at the boy. The boy picked it up and scampered off, holding the shoe in his hand.

Gulab shouted loudly and told the sepoy to chase him, but they enjoyed the fun so heartily that they did not care to listen to the wild shouts of the tailor.

That evening Gulab finished the blouse and gave it to the Badshah. He gave it to the Begum

saying, 'This blouse has no match in the world.' The Begum was exceedingly delighted to see such an exquisite specimen of craftsmanship.

After some days, she wore it and rode through the town. While passing through a low locality, she saw a woman in a blouse exactly like hers. She immediately returned to the Palace and went to the Badshah, fuming and fretting.

'You told me that this blouse has no match,' said she to the Badshah who was at a loss to understand the behaviour of the Begum.

'That's quite true,' answered he.

'It is not true.'

'Why not?'

'This evening I saw such a blouse worn by a common woman sitting at a window in her house.'

'Impossible!'

'Why impossible? I have seen her with my own eyes. Have you no trust in my words?'

Akbar was astonished at this incident. He asked his attendant to inquire into the matter. After some time he learnt after investigation that the wife of Gulab had put on such a blouse.

He ordered the tailor and his wife to be produced before him.

When they came there, he shouted, 'Rascal ! You have deceived me.'

What offence have I given Your Majesty ? said the tailor respectfully.

' You have stolen a piece from the fabric given to you.'

' Your Majesty ! ' answered he, ' I have not committed this offence. I was watched by Your Majesty's officers. How could I thief it ? '

' It is a damned lie. Give out the truth or you shall be hanged. '

' I am speaking the truth. I have not taken even an inch from the fabric. '

' If it is so, how has your wife got a blouse like the one you prepared for the Begum the other day ? '

' Your Majesty ! I confess that it is the same cloth. '

' If you confess it, why do you say that you have not stolen it ? '

' Yes, it is the same cloth, but I still say that I have not stolen it. '

' Then how did you come by it ? '

‘ I shall explain it to Your Majesty. I worked for four days without visiting my home. My wife sent my son to inquire about me. The boy is rather naughty and began to talk rudely with me. I am quiet by temperament, but as he grew insolent in the presence of others, I hurled at him my shoe lying nearby. He picked it up and made the best of his way. I requested the watchman to chase him, but they laughed away the whole incident. Now I had put into the shoe through mistake a small piece from the fabric, as it was left over after the cutting of the cloth. When I went home in the evening after finishing my work in the Palace, I looked for the piece, but couldn't find it in the shoe. Neither my wife nor my son gave me satisfactory answers. Only this evening I saw my wife wearing a blouse made of that cloth and I lost my temper. I rebuked her harshly and asked her to give it to me, but she refused to do so. I was about to use force to recover it from her, when both of us were ordered to come here. This is what has actually happened. ’

‘ Is this true ? ’ said the Badshah to Gulab's wife.

‘ Yes, Your Majesty ! ’ replied she.

‘Then why did you refuse to part with the blouse? Do you mean to retain its illicit possession?’ asked the Emperor, wondering at the impudence of the woman.

‘I don’t know whether it is a stolen article or not, but I am sure that I would be guilty, should I return it to the Begum Saheba’, answered the woman.

‘How?’

‘Because the piece of cloth was in the shoe of my husband. How can it be used by the Begum Saheba? When I saw it in the shoe for the first time, I believed that it was for me; hence I made a blouse out of it. When my husband told me to return the blouse, I knew the whole thing. How could I send it to the Begum Saheba? We people may put on the clothes used by Her Majesty, but will she put on clothes used by us? This thought prevented me from returning the blouse. My husband has no sense to understand this simple point.’

The Badshah was astonished at the answer of the tailor’s wife. He could not believe that such an intelligent answer could be given by a simple woman. He therefore said, ‘I pardon your offence, but tell me who taught you this

deep game ? ’

‘ No one has taught me anything, Your Majesty ! I have narrated simple facts, ’ replied the woman calmly.

On further inquiry, the Badshah discovered that the tailor belonged to the Birbal’s native town. He was so pleased with the intellectual sharpness of the tailor and his wife that he bestowed rich gifts on them when they left the Darbar.

LXII

Who Is Happy ?

One day the Badshah asked Birbal in the full Darbar, ' Who is happy ? '

' Your Majesty ! ' replied Birbal, ' No living being is happy. He is happy only after death. '

' Why is it so ? ' said the Badshah.

' The reason is very simple. One who is happy to-day may be reduced to misery to-morrow. Man does not know when he will be assailed by a sea of difficulties. He is always anxious about the morrow. The clouds of impending gloom shatter all his hopes for happiness. What sort of happiness can he enjoy in this world ? How can we know whether the heart of a seemingly happy man is really happy or not ? Therefore, in my opinion, real happiness comes to a man only after his death, for all his miseries end with death. '

LXIII

Reading Of Thoughts

One day the Badshah said to the courtiers, 'Can any of you read the thought uppermost in the mind of each of you present here just now?'

All courtiers got nervous on hearing this question, for they feared that the workings of their minds would be unfolded by some one among them. They grew pale with fear and deemed it wise to refrain from attempting an imaginary answer. When they expressed their inability to give an answer, the Badshah told Birbal, to attempt it.

'Shall I unfold each thought separately or shall I give the substance of all their thoughts put together?' said Birbal.

'Give the substance, if you can,' replied Akbar.

‘ There is only one thought uppermost in the minds of all who are sitting here, viz., ‘ Your Majesty’s Empire, happiness and glory should last as long as the sun and the moon shine in the sky. If Your Majesty doubts the truth of my answer, please refer it to them. ’

The Badshah and courtiers were much amused at this wonderful answer.

LXIV

Who Takes Tobacco ?

Once the Badshah and Birbal were standing in the terrace of the Palace overlooking the green fields of tobacco. They were deeply absorbed in feasting their eyes with the beauty of nature all around, when an ass standing in a tobacco field happened to attract the eyes of the Badshah. Birbal was addicted to tobacco. The Emperor who did not like this habit said, 'Look there, Birbal ! Even that ass does not touch tobacco.'

'Yes, Your Majesty !' replied Birbal, 'only such animals avoid it.'

Akbar laughed at this sharp retort and praised Birbal's ready-wittedness.

LXV

Pulling The Beard

One day, when the Badshah was sitting in the harem of the Palace, the Begum brought their grandson and put him on his lap. The child while playing began to pull the beard of the Emperor who enjoyed this mischief heartily.

After some time, he came out of the harem and saw Birbal. He said to him, 'Birbal ! what punishment should I inflict on one who pulls my beard ?'

'Your Majesty !' replied Birbal promptly, 'give him sweets.'

The Emperor was amused at this answer and shook hands with Birbal.

LXVI

Heaven and Hell

One day the Badshah said to Birbal, 'Can you tell me, Birbal, who goes to Heaven and who to Hell?'

'Your Majesty!' replied Birbal, 'those whom people love even after their death go to Heaven, and those whom people hate after their death go to Hell.'

The Badshah was satisfied with this answer.

LXVII

Who is a Glutton ?

One day the Badshah and the Begum were eating mangoes in the terrace of the Palace. The Badshah after sucking the juice from the mangoes would put the peels and stones by the side of the Begum. After some time, Birbal arrived there. He had free access even to the private chambers of the Badshah.

Seeing Birbal there, the Badshah could not resist the temptation of making fun of the Begum. He said, 'Birbal ! do you see how gluttonous the Begum is ? What a heap of peels and mango-stones she has collected by her side !'

The Begum took offence at this remark and made a wry face. Birbal always ran to her help on such occasions. He therefore answered on

behalf of the Begum: 'A man is influenced by the company he keeps.'

'Do you mean to say that she has grown gluttonous as the result of my contact with her?' said Akbar.

'Your Majesty!' replied Birbal, 'the wife always follows in the foot-steps of her husband.'

'But I am not a glutton,' answered Akbar; 'peels and stones are lying by her side. There is nothing beside me.'

'I say the same thing, Your Majesty! The Begum Saheba has sucked only the juice of the mangoes, but Your Majesty has eaten even the peels and stones!'

The Badshah was silenced by this answer and the Begum who was transported with joy added: 'He would have eaten up even this heap of peels and stones, if I were not present here.'

Whose Father ?

Once Birbal caught severe cold, and his loins and neck were aching. While walking, he had to look downwards.

Seeing him walk in this way, the Badshah desired to cut a joke at his expense.

‘What do you look for, Birbal?’ said the Badshah.

Birbal was indisposed and his body was aching. He therefore replied with uneasiness, ‘My father.’

‘Is he concealed in the bowels of the earth?’

‘Yes, Your Majesty.’

‘If you can’t find him out, shall I help you?’

‘ I shall feel obliged to Your Majesty in that case. ’

‘ But what will you give me, if I succeed in discovering your lost father ? ’

‘ One--half, ’ replied Birbal.

The Badshah was rendered speechless by this answer.

LXIX

Catching The Thief

One day a leading merchant of Delhi approached Birbal and said, 'A purse full of silver coins has been stolen from my house. There was nobody present in my house except my six servants.'

'Then one of them must have taken it,' said Birbal.

'Yes, Sir. I tried with them all the four expedients of persuasion, gratification, punishment, and division, but could not lay my hand on the culprit.'

'Do you suspect any servant?' said Birbal.

'No, Sir,' replied the merchant, 'I have no particular reason to doubt the integrity of any one of them.'

'Well, then,' said Birbal, 'You can go home and send all your servants here. Possibly I shall detect the thief by to-morrow.'

The gentleman went home and sent all his servants to Birbal, who had kept six bamboo sticks of the same length ready for them. He gave one stick to each of them, saying: 'Look sharp! one of you has committed a theft in the house of your master and.....'.

'Not I! not I!' cried all of them simultaneously.

'You need not interrupt me,' said Birbal sternly, 'You perhaps do not know that I have learnt a magic charm from a yogi living on the Himalayas. I give a charmed bamboo sticks to each of you and sprinkle water on you all. All the sticks are of the same length. You will sleep here to-night, keeping the sticks with you. In the morning the stick of the thief will have grown longer by two inches. You can now retire to separate rooms. I shall inspect your sticks to-morrow morning. The thief will be visited with severe punishment and the rest will be acquitted.'

Each of the servants was confined to a separate room. All lay quietly, but the thief

could not get sleep. He said to himself, 'Is there any truth in what Birbal says or is he simply bluffing? Will the stick grow longer to-morrow morning? If it does so, I shall be surely detected.'

Thus a number of thoughts flashed across his mind. For a moment he doubted the words of Birbal and thought that it was all a hoax. The next moment he feared that he would be caught and punished. At last after much thinking, he came to the conclusion that he should make an effort to outwit Birbal. He took a pen-knife and cut off two inches from the stick in order that it might be of the same length the next morning when Birbal would inspect it. His mind was set at ease and he could sleep peacefully for the rest of that night.

In the morning Birbal measured all the sticks and found that one stick was shorter than the rest. He said to the servant whose stick was shorter, 'You have stolen the purse.'

'Not I. I know nothing about it', answered the man with perfect equanimity.

'Then how is it that your stick has grown shorter?' said Birbal, looking harshly at him.

'Is my stick shorter?' said he wondering

'Yes, look here!' replied Birbal, 'How do account for this?'

'You said that the stick of the thief would grow longer by two inches, whereas my stick is found shorter', argued he.

'Yes, I did say so', answered Birbal.

'Then these five friends of mine, whose sticks are longer must be guilty of the theft.'

'It's a lie, Sir', said they to Birbal. 'May God punish us, if we are guilty.'

'Don't worry about that', said Birbal. 'There was a slight mistake in my statement. I ought to have said that the stick of the thief would grow shorter in consequence of my charm. This stick has become shorter, proving that this man is the object of our search.'

'But you should stick to your words, Sir', said the guilty man.

'Don't beat about the bush', said Birbal. 'Confess your crime or I order my servants to give you sound thrashing.'

The thief, seeing that it was impossible for him to throw dust in the eyes of Birbal, confessed his crime and showed the place where the purse was hidden. Birbal returned it to its owner and inflicted severe punishment on the thief.

LXX

A Bull's Milk

‘**H**ow strange these physicians are!’ remarked the Badshah one day.

‘Why?’ asked Birbal.

‘My physician has given me medicine to be taken with a bull’s milk,’ replied Akbar.

‘A bull’s milk!’ exclaimed Birbal.

‘Yes. I told him that it is impossible to get it, but he said that you (Birbal) could bring it, as there was nothing impossible for you.’

Birbal could see that the physician wanted to test him. As he had exposed his cunning so often, he harboured malice against him and had devised that plan to disparage him in the eyes of the Badshah.

‘Can a bull give milk, Your Majesty ? It must be a cow’s milk,’ said Birbal.

‘Am I a fool not to understand this simple point ?’ asked the Badshah. ‘I told him the same thing, but he answered that the milk of a cow or a buffalo would not do. So you have got to produce it any how.’

Birbal knew that it was useless to argue with the obstinate Emperor. He therefore went home, pondering over how to get it.

‘What happened in the Darbar to-day ?’ asked his daughter.

‘Something happens everyday in the court. You need not worry about it’, answered Birbal.

‘It seems something serious has taken place to-day. I may find a way for you, if you tell me what it is.’

‘If I cannot solve a difficulty, how can you even dream of attempting it ?’ said Birbal pensively.

‘What harm is there in telling it to me ?’ asked the girl. ‘Many a knife can do what a sword cannot.’

‘Then listen if you are so eager to know it. The Badshah has been advised by his physician

to take a certain medicine with a bull's milk. I have been asked by him to procure the milk. I tried to convince him that it was an impossible task, but he refused to listen to me. This is the cause of my anxiety. '

Birbal's daughter who was as clever as himself replied, 'Father ! don't be anxious about it. I shall accomplish that task. '

' You ? How will you do it ? ' asked Birbal.

' Have you no faith in your child, father ? Be at ease and rest yourself. '

After some days the girl gathered a heap of dirty clothes in the house and went, taking the bundle with her, to the river near the Palace at the dead of night, and began to wash them on a slab not far from the Palace. While striking the linen on the slab, she shouted, ' Hash ! Hash ! '

The Badshah who was in deep sleep was awakened by her shouts and asked the sentinel to see who made that noise.

The soldier went and saw that a young girl was washing her clothes.

' Who are you ? ' said he to the girl. ' What are you doing there ? '

‘Have you not got a pair of eyes to see who I am? I am a woman washing my soiled linen.’ answered the girl boldly,

‘Is this a proper time for washing clothes?’

‘I do it when I get time.’

‘Who are you to disturb the sleep of the Emperor at such a time?’

‘Didn’t you hear me? I am a woman—a girl—to put it more exactly.’

‘Whose daughter are you?’

‘My father’s,’

‘Who is your father?’

‘My mother’s husband.’

‘You are giving me rude answers. I should take you to the Emperor for punishment.’

The sentinel took her to the Emperor and told him everything about her.

The Badshah grew very angry with her and said, ‘You foolish girl! Who are you? Why are you washing your linen near my Palace at midnight?’

The girl who began to tremble with fear replied, ‘Your Majesty! I.....I.....’

‘Speak at once’, said the Badshah

impatiently.

‘ Your Majesty ! I... ..I.....’

Akbar’s heart melted at the condition of the girl. He said, ‘ Don’t be afraid. Explain to me clearly why you were working at such an odd hour of the night. If your explanation is not satisfactory, I shall have to punish you. ’

‘ Your Majesty ! I was compelled to wash the linen at this time ’, answered the girl.

‘ Who compelled you ? ’

‘ How can I put it to Your Majesty ? At noon my father gave birth to a son, ’ answered she.

‘ What ? ’ cried out Akbar.

‘ My father has given birth to a son and I was busy for the whole day in that connection. He had no spare clothes to put on in his confinement. So I came here to wash these ones. ’

‘ Are you mad ? ’ said the Badshah. ‘ Or are you joking ? Who has heard of a man giving birth to a child ?’

‘ Your Majesty ! ’ replied the girl, ‘ it sounds incredible, but nowadays such unheard-of things do happen in our town. ’

‘Explain yourself more clearly,’ said the Badshah.

‘If your Majesty orders somebody to produce a bull’s milk, why should a man not bear a child?’

Akbar could understand the whole situation. He said to the girl, ‘Are you related to Birbal?’

‘Yes, Your Majesty! I am his daughter,’ replied she.

‘I see. Then go and tell your father that I have received a bull’s milk from him, but it is to be given to the new-born babe.’

‘But how will he be convinced that you have received the milk?’

‘I pass a receipt,’ answered the Badshah. He then wrote a receipt, signed it and gave it to the girl who went home and passed it on to her father. Birbal could see that his daughter had surpassed him in point of intelligence. He thanked her and went to the physician to show him the receipt. On seeing the receipt the physician received such a severe shock that he had to take the most valuable medicines for a week to recover from it.

Only For Money

One day the Badshah and Birbal were sauntering in the Palace garden, when the latter remarked incidentally, 'One would be ready to run any risk for the sake of money.'

It was winter and biting winds were blowing. While they were passing by the tank in the garden, Akbar dipped his hand in the water and withdrew it instantaneously, for it was cold as ice.

'Birbal!' said he to his minister, 'your remark is incorrect. No man would be willing to sit in the tank for a night, whatever amount of money you may give him. If he does so, he would be frozen to death.'

‘Your Majesty!’ answered Birbal, ‘some one may come forward to pass a night in the icy water of the tank in the warmth of money.’

‘It is easy to say so,’ said one courtier; ‘such a man would hardly be found anywhere in the world except perhaps in the fertile brain of Birbal.’

‘That is true’, retorted Birbal; ‘in my brain there are many things which you won’t find anywhere else in the world. If His Majesty the Emperor orders me, I would find out such a man.’

‘Yes’, said the Emperor. ‘If you bring such a man as would pass one full night in the tank, I will give him whatever reward he chooses.’

After a great deal of inquiry, Birbal found out a poor man who was ready to fulfil this condition. He presented the man to the Emperor who said to him, ‘Are you ready to pass the whole night in the tank? Bear in mind, you cannot derive warmth from any sort of the fire or flame.’

The man expressed his willingness to act accordingly. The Badshah stationed sentinels all around the tank to see that the man did not

practise any deception.

The poor man passed the whole night in the cold water of the tank. In the morning he betook himself to the Badshah who was much surprised to find him alive.

‘Did you stay in the tank for the whole night?’ inquired he of the man.

‘Yes, Your Majesty!’ replied he.

The sentinels also corroborated his statement.

‘Did you not die from exposure to cold?’ said the Badshah.

‘No, Your Majesty!’ replied the man, ‘I felt like dying two or three times, but I managed to get over it.’

‘But how could you live in such icy water?’

‘Your Majesty.’ replied he, ‘there was a solitary lamp burning on the seventh storey of the Palace. I passed the whole night gazing at it.’

‘He has not fulfilled the condition’, interrupted a courtier.

‘Why not?’ said the Badshah.

‘He derived warmth from the lamp in the Palace.’ answered the courtier. ‘It was laid

down as a condition by Your Majesty that he should not derive any warmth from a heater.'

'That's true,' said the Badshah; 'you have not fulfilled the condition.' With these words the Badshah drove him away empty-handed.

The poor man was utterly disappointed of the reward. He approached Birbal and related to him his tale of woes. Birbal consoled him, saying; 'It doesn't matter. Don't get nervous. You will get your reward.'

On the following day when the Darbar was held, Birbal was conspicuous by his absence Akbar therefore wished to know why he was absent that day.

All courtiers looked at one another and chuckled. Akbar asked again, 'What is the matter? Why don't you answer my question?'

At last one of them said slowly, 'There is something wrong with his brain. It is slightly deranged.'

'Has he gone mad?' asked the Emperor wondering at the news.

'Not exactly, Your Majesty!' answered the same courtier; 'but we have heard something like that. We have not seen him personally.'

‘But tell me clearly what has actually happened,’ said the Emperor impatiently.

‘Your Majesty!’ answered he, ‘those who had gone to the river-side were talking about it.’

‘What do they say?’

‘They say that Birbal has planted three bamboos on the bank of the river to support a cooking-vessel and has lit a fire beneath it.’

‘What does it mean?’

‘It seems to me that too much thinking has adversely affected his brain.’

‘Let us go and see what it is,’ said the Badshah.

Going to the river-side, they saw Birbal trim the fire.

‘Birbal! what are you doing?’ said Akbar.

‘I am cooking rice, Your Majesty!’ answered Birbal calmly.

‘Are you a fool? Is this the way to cook the rice?’

‘Why not, Your Majesty?’ answered Birbal. ‘There is rice in the vessel which is supported by these three bamboos and here is fire to cook it.’

‘ You seem to have lost your mental equilibrium. How can the heat of the fire reach the cooking-vessel which is three storeys up ?’

‘ Why is it impossible ? The other day the heat of the lamp on the seventh storey of the Palace warmed up the poor man in the tank. This distance is far shorter than that. I don’t understand why the rice should not be cooked in this way. ’

The Badshah could see that Birbal had got up the whole drama in order to remind him of the man to whom he had meted out grave injustice.

‘ I understand it now ’, said he to Birbal. ‘ Stop this drama and let us go to the court. ’

‘ But what about my rice, Your Majesty ? ’

‘ It is cooked ’, said the Badshah; ‘ you may summon that cold-proof man and give him a suitable reward; for I have done him injustice. You have devised a nice trick to put me on the right track. ’

Back From Heaven

Birbal's increasing popularity in the Darbar excited the envy of his rivals. They decided to do away with him by hook or by crook. If he committed even a slight mistake, they would make an exaggerated report of it to the Badshah, but Birbal would get off scot-free by means of one trick or another. One day a courtier laid a plot to do away with him through the help of the Emperor's barber. Generally, barbers, while cutting the hair, use not only their clippers but also their tongues. This barber had the Emperor's ear, but he refused to listen to the courtier. He however consented to help him, when the courtier promised to gratify him.

One day when the Emperor was in high spirits, the barber said, 'Your Majesty, I clipped

the beard of Your Majesty's father. How glossy his hair was !'

'Was it ?' said Akbar without showing any interest in the talk.

'Your Majesty's grand-father was shaved by my father. His hair was like velvet.'

'May be,' answered Akbar.

'If Your Majesty permits me, I may ask a question.'

'Well, do it.'

'Your Majesty is making merry here, but what is Your Majesty's father doing in Heaven ?'

'How can we know it from here ?'

'It is not difficult', answered the barber. 'I know a spiritualist who can hold communion with him and arrange to bring a message from him.'

'Is it true ? If so, arrange to get the news of my forefathers.'

After some days the barber came to Akbar and said, 'Your Majesty ! I have arranged everything with the spiritualist. But whom shall we send there ? A very intelligent man is required for this delicate task. Birbal is the only person

in our court, suited for this purpose.'

'But how can we depute Birbal for this work?' said the Badshah, 'There is nobody here to undertake his duties.'

'That's right, Your Majesty!' answered the barber, 'but this work is equally important. If an ordinary man goes there, Your Majesty's forefathers will feel offended.'

'If that is the case, let us depute Birbal', answered the Badshah after some consideration; 'but what rites are to be performed for sending him to Heaven?'

'There is nothing special to be done', said the barber. 'Birbal will be taken to a crematory in a procession. He will be seated in the centre of a pyre of sandal-wood. Then after the recitation of the charms by the spiritualist, the pyre will be set on fire. When the pyre is burnt up completely, Birbal will go to Heaven. After having an interview with the spirits of Your Majesty's forefathers, he will return to the earth.'

'This is in no way difficult', answered the Badshah; 'let us summon Birbal.'

When Birbal came there, the Badshah ordered him to go to Heaven and bring the

news of his forefathers.

‘Your Majesty!’ said Birbal, ‘how is it possible?’

‘Why not?’ replied Akbar. ‘My barber will tell you how.’

‘But has Your Majesty heard of any man who has returned from Heaven?’

‘Ask this barber’, replied Akbar. ‘He knows a spiritualist who can send a man to Heaven to get the news of the dead.’

‘Does Your Majesty take this barber at his word?’ said Birbal.

‘Why not?’ said the Badshah. ‘Why should he tell a lie?’

‘He is a barber after all’, said Birbal ‘He knows nothing except shaving.’

‘I know many spiritualists having rare supernatural powers,’ answered the barber proudly.

‘Your Majesty! how can we trust a barber?’

‘Say that you don’t want to go’, remarked the barber.

‘Yes, I don’t want to go’, answered Birbal. ‘You had better go, if you are so keen on it. The ancient souls will be glad to see you.’

‘No, Birbal!’ replied the Badshah; ‘it is impossible for me to send a barber to my forefathers.’

Birbal could see that it was useless to argue with the Emperor. He therefore said, ‘I am ready to go, Your Majesty; but I don’t know the way to Heaven.’

Akbar acquainted Birbal with the procedure of going there, from which Birbal saw that there was a plot to do away with him. He made up his mind to pay the barber in the same coin. He said, ‘I must have a large sum of money to be spent on my way to Heaven as also for the upkeep of my family during my absence.’

Akbar gave him as much money as he needed, and two months’ leave of absence for making preparations. During this time, Birbal got an underground tunnel constructed from his home to the crematory, having small openings at both ends.

At the end of two months, Birbal presented himself in the Darbar. He was taken to the burning ground in a grand procession. The spiritualist was present there. Birbal was seated on the ground and a pyre was set up around him. The spiritualist recited the charm and set fire

to the pyre. Birbal secretly managed to sprinkle some powder on the fire, which sent forth thick clouds of smoke. He then slowly slipped into the tunnel underneath and went home through it. Then he put on the dress of a **Sadhu** and went to the cremation grounds to join the crowds there. From the whispering of some courtiers he got the name of the courtier who had played this mischief. When the pyre was completely burnt up, all thought that Birbal's body was reduced to ashes, and so they went home amid the joy of Birbal's enemies.

Birbal confined himself within the walls of his house for some days and then went to the court, having grown a long beard and moustache. He wore a peculiar dress and so even the Badshah could not recognise him, but he was delighted when he knew that he was Birbal. He said joyfully, 'Have you returned Birbal?'

'Yes, Your Majesty', answered he. 'I have returned safe and sound through the grace of the Almighty.'

'How are my ancestors there? Do they remember me?'

'Your Majesty, they are all right. They are pleased to see Your Majesty's fame spread all

over the world with the lapse of time, but.....'

'What is it?'

'Nothing in particular.'

'But there is something, I believe?'

'It's a trifle, Your Majesty!'

'But tell me what it is.'

'They all eat, drink and make merry there. They have no hardship there except one.'

'What is it? Don't talk in a round-about manner.'

'The fact is that there is no barber in Heaven.'

'Has no dead barber gone there?'

'Your Majesty, no barber has yet gone there with the result that Your Majesty's forefathers are put to a lot of trouble. Their beards have grown so long that they cannot walk easily, and tumble down very often when their forward motion is obstructed by the beards. Once or or twice while they tried to shave themselves, they were bled by the razor. Other inmates of Heaven make a fun of them, for they are forefathers of a mighty emperor like Your Majesty!'

'If that is the case, let us send a barber to Heaven from here.'

‘ They will be very glad, if we do so. They remember our court barber very much. ’

Birbal further advised the Badshah to send with the barber as his guide that courtier who had plotted against him.

Akber summoned the barber and the courtier and asked them to be ready to go to Heaven.

They were astonished to see Birbal come back. They knew full well that it was impossible for them to return to the earth, if they went there; so they tried their utmost to escape from this difficult situation, but could not succeed and while hitting Birbal, they hit themselves mortally.

LXXIII

A Story That Has No End

Once the Badshah was caught in the grip of insomnia. He tried a number of soporific medicines, but could not win sleep. At last a Hakim showed him a way to get sleep. He said to him, 'Your Majesty should refresh the mind by hearing delightful stories every evening? With the relief of tension, sleep will come to you automatically.'

'But how can I get story-tellers everyday?' said the Emperor.

'It's not difficult', replied the Hakim; 'there are many scholars in the Darbar. They should be summoned every evening one by one and asked to tell stories.'

Akbar liked this suggestion. Courtiers would go to him in turn and tell him interesting stories. But he was never fed up with the stories. At the end of a story, he would say, 'What next ?' The story-teller would be compelled to invent a story and narrate it to him. The oft-repeated expression 'What next ?' gained so much currency that it was uttered as joke by the courtiers.

One evening it was Birbal's turn to tell a story. He began a long and interesting story. Akbar would say, 'What next ?' at short intervals. Thus the whole story was finished; yet Akbar said, 'What next ?' as he was wont to say. Birbal told him another story, yet the Badshah said, 'What next ?' He told another story, yet the Badshah was not satisfied. He repeated the same old question. Birbal was feeling sleepy, for he was completely exhausted. He made up his mind to stop this 'What next ?' He therefore invented a story and narrated it as follows :—

'There was a cottage in a jungle. A Bhil family lived there.'

'What next ?' said the Emperor.

'There were different kinds of birds and

beasts in the forest. The Bhil would keep the family safe at night by burning a constant fire near the cottage or by opposing them with his staff. But birds would often rush into his cottage and take away grains in their beaks.'

'What next?'

'After a long deliberation, the Bhil hit upon a plan to get rid of this nuisance. He went to a neighbouring town and purchased a big earthen jar. He put all the grain in it and sealed it.'

'What next?'

'When the birds came, they did not see any grain in the hut. Some of them sat on the jar and tried to open it, but could not succeed in their effort.'

'What next?'

'So all the birds were disappointed. They thought of a plan to open the jar.'

'What next?'

'There was an intelligent sparrow who made friends with a mouse in the hut. The mouse made a hole in the jar.'

'What next?'

‘When the birds knew that the jar was opened, they all assembled to share the grain.’

‘What next?’

‘About six hundred birds gathered there. One of them picked up some grain and flew away.’

‘What next?’

‘Then another bird flew away.’

‘What next?’

‘Then a third bird flew away.’

‘What Next?’

‘A fourth bird flew away.’

‘What next?’

‘A fifth bird flew away.’

‘What next?’

‘A sixth bird flew away.’

‘What next?’

‘A seventh bird flew away.’

‘What next?’

‘An eighth bird flew away.’

‘What next?’

‘A ninth bird flew away.’

‘What next?’

‘ A tenth bird flew away. ’

‘Oh ! Birdal ! How many birds still remain to fly ? ’

‘Your Majesty ! ’ replied Birbal, ‘only ten birds have yet flown away. Over five hundred birds still remain to fly. Then the eleventh bird flew away.’

‘ That’s all ! Now when will this flight stop ? ’

‘ When Your Majesty’s ‘what next ?’ stops, ’ replied Birbal yawning.

Akbar could see the the point and gave up the habit of repeating that tedious phrase. When the courtiers knew this their joy knew no bounds. They all said, ‘ Birbal is more than a match for the Badshah. ’

An unprecedented Task

'Birbal ! 'said the Badshah one day, 'you are very clever and nobody can surpass you in intelligence.'

'It is all due to Your Majesty's grace. My intelligence has been developed because of my contact with Your Majesty.'

'You may say whatever you like. I have never seen the like of you. You are ready-witted, no doubt, but now I want you to do something unprecedented.'

'I am Your Majesty's obedient servant. If you promise me free pardon, I may do something miraculous. But it will entail a heavy expenditure and take a long time.'

'You may take as much time and money as

you please, but do something unprecedented. I promise you free pardon for whatever you do. You will not only be not punished, but I will give you prize of your choice.'

'Your Majesty! I shall need three lakhs of rupees and six months' time.'

'You will get the money from the treasury tomorrow, but do something that surprises all.'

Birbal got three lakhs of rupees from the state treasury. He donated one lakh to the Brahmins, distributed another lakh among his poor relatives and kept the remaining money for himself.

Many days passed away and the Badshah forgot everything about this affair.

'Why is Birbal not seen in the Darbar?' inquired he of the other courtiers.

'Your Majesty!' replied one of them, 'he is ill abed.'

'Then I must go to see him', said the Emperor.

He at once went to the residence of, Birbal. On reaching there he found that all the members of his family were gloomy as if some great calamity were to befall their family.

‘How is Birbal?’ said he to the son of Birbal.

‘Your Majesty!’ replied the son, ‘my father is seriously ill. He remembers Your Majesty every now and again.’

Akbar went near the patient’s bed and was grieved to find that Birbal’s condition was critical.

‘Why didn’t you inform me that you were ill’, said the Badshah to Birbal.

‘Your Majesty!’ he replied panting, ‘my condition was not so bad, but for the last three days.....’

‘Have rest,’ said the Emperor.

‘It seems I can’t live long.’

‘Don’t say so. I am arranging to call in an eminent physician who will restore you to full health by to-morrow morning.’

‘I don’t entertain such false hopes. I can hardly live for more than three days. I don’t fear death, but who will look after all these people here?’

Don’t be anxious about them. I promise to look after them.’

After some time, the Emperor took leave of Birbal with a heavy heart. After two or three days, he received the sad tidings of Birbal's demise. Akbar and his courtiers attended his funeral and observed three days' public mourning.

Time passed on. Akbar felt that there was no one in the Darbar to fill up the gap caused by Birbal's death. One day while he was thinking of the loss, the usher came to him running.

'What's there? Why are you so much frightened?'

'Your Majesty! Birbal.....' said the usher.

In the meantime, Birbal entered the Darbar hall. All were bewildered at seeing him and rose to their feet. One of them cried out, 'This is Birbal's ghost!'

The Emperor was also surprised to see him. He said, 'Are you Birbal?'

'Yes, Your Majesty!'

'How could you come back from the Land of the Dead?'

'Your Majesty! It is true that I died, but I pleased Indra, King of Gods, by my wit so

much so that he has permitted me to come here.'

'I am glad that you have come. I was ill at ease in your absence.'

'I have brought a nymph, a palace and miraculous clothes from Heaven for Your Majesty.'

'Why don't you bring them here?'

'That's not possible, Your Majesty. She would not come here of her own accord. Your Majesty will have to go to receive her, and bring her here in a grand procession.'

Akbar sent his Minister and some leading members of his court to verify the truth of Birbal's statements. They went to a solitary seven-storeyed palace of exquisite beauty. Standing at the entrance, Birbal said, 'Look at the palace and the nymph sitting in the balcony of the seventh storey. Observe her bewitching beauty.'

All looked minutely at the balcony of the palace, but couldn't see any one there.

'There is no one on the balcony,' said they.

'Oh! I am extremely sorry', answered

Birbal, 'I forgot to tell you one thing. She is a heavenly creature that can be perceived by one who is of pure blood and whose wife is loyal. Now look carefully and tell me if you can see her.'

'Yes', replied the Minister, 'I can perceive her distinctly. What a beauty!'

The Minister did not like to be regarded as a person of mixed blood, having a faithless wife. Though he saw none on the balcony, he pretended as if he were seeing a real nymph. Birbal put the same question to all other courtiers who also gave similar answers, lest they should lose their rank. Then all returned to the court, praising the nymph who existed only in the brain of Birbal. They gave a vivid description of the beauty of the nymph to Akbar, who grew impatient to see her. He went to the heavenly palace in a grand procession. He was deeply impressed with the beauty of the palace. He said to Birbal, 'Take me into the presence of the nymph now.'

'Look! Your Majesty! She is gazing at you from the balcony of the seventh storey.'

Akbar tried to see her, but could see none there.

‘Where is she?’ said he.

‘I forgot to tell one thing to Your Majesty. She is a divine creature that can be perceived only by those who are of pure blood and who have loyal wives at home. The same applies to the clothes I have brought from Heaven. The Minister and other courtiers who accompanied me previously can see her.’

‘Yes, she is standing there’, said one of the courtiers.

‘Your Majesty! Look there. She is standing on the balcony of the seventh storey’, said the Minister. Akbar thought that if he said that he could not see the nymph he would lose his prestige. He, therefore, said, ‘Yes, Yes. I can see her. How charming she looks! Come along Birbal. Take me to her.’

‘Before we go there we shall have to take off our earthly clothes and put on heavenly ones. I have brought them for all. He gave the Emperor special dress to wear. When the Emperor had put on the new dress, Birbal said to the Minister, ‘Will you please put on these heavenly clothes?’

‘Where are they?’ said the Minister, ‘I cannot see them.’

‘Here are they in my hands. Can’t you see them?’ said Birbal.

The Minister fearing that he would lose his prestige said, ‘Yes, I can see them. Let me wear them.’

The Minister took off all his clothes and pretended as if he were wearing heavenly clothes given by Birbal.

Thus Birbal contrived to make all other courtiers naked. He then went inside the palace and returned in a short time, saying, Your Majesty ! I have just consulted the nymph, who says that this time is not auspicious. She will come to Your Majesty’s palace after two days.’

Akbar agreed to this proposal. Then all turned homeward. Akbar and Birbal had clothes on, but other members of his Cabinet and the courtiers followed them naked. All the people of the town came out to see the procession of nudists. They could not make out why they were walking in that condition. At last a child shouted, ‘The Minister is naked’ ! Other children also gathered there and raised similar shouts.

One courtier who could not bear this

humbug came to the Minister and said, 'I am tired of this farce. I don't mind being considered a man of low birth.'

'What's there?'

'Birbal befools all of us. There are no clothes on our bodies and we have become the target of ridicule in the whole town.'

Birbal saw that it was no use hiding facts. He therefore approached the Emperor and said, 'Your Majesty! I have to offer an explanation.'

'For what?' inquired the Emperor.

'Will Your Majesty look at the Minister and courtiers? Have they put on any clothes?'

'Why not? You gave them special clothes brought by you from Heaven.'

'It is all a hoax,' answered Birbal. 'Some eight months ago, Your Majesty asked me to do something miraculous and promised me pardon.'

'Yes, I remember it,' said the Emperor.

'This is the miraculous thing I have done', said Birbal.

'Which?' inquired the Emperor.

‘ Your Majesty ! Has anybody taken out ever before a procession of such distinguished nudists in the town of Delhi ? ’

Then Birbal explained everything to Akbar, who was angry for a moment, but could not help laughing at the sight of nudists. He gave Birbal a prize of his choice for displaying such rare resourcefulness.

Wild Trees

Once there was some misunderstanding between the Badshah and his Begum for an unknown reason. The latter had a melancholy time, for she could not make out why the Badshah was offended. Her maid-attendant advised her to seek the help of Birbal, who, she said, would resolve the deadlock. The Begum had profound faith in the ability of Birbal to help her out of the difficulty.

Being a close friend of Akbar, Birbal had a free access to the harem. He was at liberty to call on the Begum whenever he desired.

‘What can I do for Your Majesty?’ said Birbal respectfully, as he entered the apartment of the Begum.

‘ The Badshah has been offended with me,’ replied she, ‘ and he would not even look at me. As there is none except you to show me how to reconcile him, I feel compelled to seek your help.’

‘ Why is he angry ? What have you done to give him so much offence ? ’ asked Birbal.

‘ I have done nothing to offend him,’ replied the Begum. ‘ I have long pondered over the question, but don’t remember to have given him the slightest cause for provocation. If I know what mistake I have committed, I may tender my apology for it. I have racked my brains to find out the cause of my misfortune but in vain.’

‘ What does he say to Your Majesty ? ’ inquired Birbal.

‘ He says nothing,’ replied the Begum; ‘ he does not reveal the cause of his anger.’

‘ What does he do out of anger ? Has he condemned you to any sort of punishment or does he scold you ? ’

‘ He does nothing like this.’

‘ Then on what ground do you say that he has taken offence ? ’

‘ Just listen to me. I don’t keep good health of late and take the medicine given by the State Hakim. I cannot do any work. Special varieties of food have got to be prepared for me to suit my taste. Three or four maid-servants are in constant attendance upon me. It seems he does not like this. He says that I pretend to be ill and all these things are not needed.’

‘ But does he not know that you are in delicate health ?’ inquired Birbal.

‘ How is it possible that he might not know it ?’ replied the Begum bashfully. ‘ Formerly he would inquire after my health every now and again, and would cause medicine to be administered to me by Hakim much against my will. Heaven knows why he has now swung to the other extreme. He has ordered all my maid-attendants to be dismissed from the next week. I shall have no special dishes to suit my taste, nor shall I have doses of medicines from the Hakim.’

The fact was that the Begum was heavy with a child and her delicate health called for special care. She was much surprised at his changed attitude.

‘ Don’t worry about it, Your Majesty !’

answered Birbal after some deliberation. 'I shall look into the matter and present myself here in a few days.'

That very evening Akbar and Birbal went out for a walk. During their walk, Akbar remarked incidentally, 'A few days ago while I was walking here, I witnessed a sight which I could not believe for a while.'

'May I inquire what is was?' said Birbal.

'One afternoon I saw a Bhil woman sitting under that banyan tree. I read signs of acute pain on her face. Will you believe me? Before I could go to her and ask her what was wrong with her, she gave birth to a child. I was at a loss to understand what she would do. She rose, cleaned her baby and putting it into a basket, she went her way, as if nothing had happened. This incident led me to the conclusion that we pay too much attention to our expectant women, and if they have the slightest pain, we make a thousand efforts to nurse them or treat them medically. Why should there be all this fuss?'

Birbal could surmise from this talk why the Badshah had changed his attitude to his Begum.

Believing that it was useless to argue with him at the moment, he simply said, 'It is time, Your Majesty !'

The next morning Birbal went to the Begum and explained to her the whole situation saying, 'Now Your Majesty must have understood why the Badshah has been offended.'

'I understand it,' replied she; 'but how should I reconcile him? You know it is useless to argue with him.'

'I have thought over the matter,' said Birbal. 'Please do as I tell you and he will come round of his own accord.'

'I am ready to do whatever you say, but I must be helped out of this difficulty.'

Birbal told her what to do and took leave of her.

Then the Begum summoned the Superintendent of the Palace Gardens and ordered him to cease watering the plants of the garden until further orders.

'How can I do it, Your Majesty?' exclaimed the poor Superintendent. 'The trees and plants will die without water.'

'Let them die,' answered the Begum firmly.

‘Your Majesty!’ said the man trembling with fear, ‘when His Majesty the Emperor visits the garden and sees the plants withering away, he will order me to be beheaded. I have definite orders to look after certain trees which he likes most.’

‘Whatever it may be, you have got to obey me. If you are to be punished, tell the Badshah that you have acted thus in pursuance of my orders.’

‘Excuse me, Your Majesty!’ answered the Garden Superintendent humbly; ‘I am sorry to disobey you; I can’t do that. If I do it, it would cost me my head.’

‘If you don’t execute my orders, I shall send you to jail just now.’

The poor man found himself between the devil and the deep sea. He at last decided to avert the immediate calamity by promising to do as he was told, provided that he was assured of safety. The Begum promised to save him from any risk entailed by his conduct.

After the lapse of a week’s time, Akbar came to the Begum, fuming and fretting. He shouted, ‘Have you ordered the Garden Superintendent

to refrain from watering the plants of the garden ?'

' Yes, Dear ! ' replied the Begum.

' His gross neglect of duty would have cost him his life, had he not excused himself on the ground that he was acting under your orders. Why should you pass such strange orders ?'

' The Lord of my Life ! ' replied the Begum calmly, ' I have not come in your way without a strong reason. '

' What is it ? ' said the Emperor.

' Some days ago, ' replied the Begum, ' I had a strange experience. I went to a forest where I saw huge trees bearing abundant ripe fruit. There were green leaves and flowers on them. On inquiry I came to know that there was nobody to water them. I thought that if those trees could flourish without being watered by a gardener, there was no reason why our trees should not behave in like manner. I therefore asked the Garden Superintendent to stop watering our garden trees. '

' But the garden trees are different from the wild ones, ' answered the Badshah.

‘ So is a queen different from a Bhil woman,’ replied the Begum.

‘ I see,’ said the Emperor; ‘ I am sure Birbal has shown this trick to you. I am now convinced of my mistake. From now I will behave as I did in the past.’

The Begum called Birbal into her presence and thanked him for his help to her. She also conferred precious gifts on him as a token of her appreciation of his service.

Saved From The Gallows

A certain business man named Hirachand lived in Delhi. It was said of him that, whosoever saw his face before anybody else's in the morning would have to go without food for the whole day.

The Badshah called him to the Palace in order to test the validity of this hearsay. He kept him there overnight and saw his face, as soon as he got up from his bed.

He then let the man off, saying to himself, 'I have seen Hirachand's face before anybody else's this morning. Let me see whether I get food to-day or not.'

Having performed his morning duties, he went to the dining hall, when a maid-attendant

of the begum came to him panting. She said
'The Begum Saheba has been taken ill all of a sudden and she wants to see Your Majesty.'

He went at once to the Begum and sent for the State Hakim, who went there immediately and gave her an efficacious drug. He remained there till she got well. As the food cooked in the morning had grown stale, he ordered the cook to prepare fresh food for himself. When the fresh dish was ready, he felt acute pain in his stomach so that he had to lie down on a couch.

The Hakim was again called in. He advised him to fast for a day, as he was suffering from intestinal disorder.

'Can I not eat anything to-day?' said he to the Hakim.

'No, Your Majesty!' replied he; 'your stomach needs rest today. Your morning meal will take a long time to be digested. It is advisable for you not to take anything to-day.'

'I took nothing in the morning.'

'So much the better for Your Majesty's health. You can take light food to-morrow. But why didn't you take anything in the morning? It is a miserable day for Your Majesty. Whose face

did you see first after getting up from bed ?

‘ Yes, I remember it. I saw the face of that wretched Hiralal. They say that one who sees his face in the morning cannot get food for the whole day. I find the people’s verdict correct.

‘ If an emperor like myself has to go without food, what about the common people ? This man should have no place in society. He should be hanged.’ He ordered Hirachand to be hanged the next morning.

When Hirachand was served with the order of execution, he was almost out of his wits. ‘ Why should I be sent to the gallows ? ’ said he to the man who had served the order on him. ‘ I have done nothing wrong. You are joking, Sir ! ’

‘ No, I am serious,’ replied the messenger.

‘ For what offence am I going to be hanged ? ’

‘ The Badshah saw your face in the morning and had to go without food for the whole day. This is no small offence.’

‘ But that’s not my fault.’

‘ I don’t know; but I have to carry out the imperial orders.’

‘ Have you any children, Sir ? ’

‘ Yes, what of that ? ’

‘ How miserable they would be, if you were visited with such a punishment ? ’

‘ I do feel for you, but how can I help you ? ’

‘ You can explain my case to him. ’

‘ Who am I to intercede with him for you ? ’

‘ Is there no other way to save my life ? ’

‘ There is only one, ’ replied the officer after some reflection. ‘ Only Birbal can show you the way out of this danger. Let us approach him. ’

Both of them went to Birbal and acquainted him with the whole situation. He heard them patiently, offered some instructions to Sheth Hirachand and told him to act upon them.

When it was time for the Sheth to be executed, the hangman told him according to the usual custom that the Badshah would grant his last wish before death.

‘ I wish to see His Majesty, ’ said he to the executioner.

‘ If you have any message for His Majesty, give it to me. I shall pass it on just now. Why not spare him the trouble of coming down to this place ? ’

‘I want to make a personal request to him.’

The message was sent to the Badshah who arrived there and asked the Sheth what he wanted to say to him.

‘I beg to invite Your Majesty’s attention to only one point,’ said he to the Emperor.

‘Say what it is.’

‘Is it true that because you saw my face in the morning, you could not get food?’

‘Quite so. If you are alive, somebody has to go without food everyday.’

‘It is true, Your Majesty. But what about the fact that I saw Your Majesty’s face first in the morning?’

‘Explain yourself more clearly.’

‘I want to say that one who sees my face goes hungry, but one who sees Your Majesty’s face loses his head. What will the world say of you?’

The Badshah pondered over this point for a while and said, ‘This idea did not strike my mind. Fortune should smile on one who sees my face in the morning.’

‘Quite true, Your Majesty, I am an insignificant creature, while you are the Lord

of the country. One who sees your face should be overwhelmed with favours. A touch-stone would transform even iron into gold. Your Majesty is like a touch-stone.'

'I see my mistake,' replied the Badshah. 'I cancel your death-sentence. A rich prize will be given to you as a reward for seeing my face first in the morning. Tell me the truth. Who taught you this device? Did you see Birbal?'

'Yes, Your Majesty. He showed me this trick to save my life.'

'Thank God that he saved your life. He has obliged me too by preventing me from the sin of hanging an innocent man.'

The Badshah let the Sheth go with a rich gift.

LXXVII

Bangles On The Hand

Once when the Badshah and Birbal were sitting in a lonely place, the former said, 'Birbal ! you must be touching the hand of your wife every day. Can you tell me how many bangles she wears on each of her hands ?'

This question plunged Birbal in deep thought. It was customary with him to refrain from a wrong answer. He therefore replied, 'I must be touching the hand of my wife once in a day. Whereas you touch your beard hundred times a day. Can you tell me the number of hair on your beard ?'

Hearing this, the Badshah said 'You are wrong there. One cannot count the hair on the beard, while the bangles can be counted.'

‘Your Majesty!’ replied Birbal, ‘women do not follow any fixed law. They vary the number of bangles on their hands every now and again. Let us put aside the question of hair. Can you tell me the number of foot-steps on the marble stair-case which you always use while going up and down?’

‘I have never counted them!’ replied the Emperor helplessly.

‘Your Majesty!’ said Birbal, ‘when you have not counted the steps of the stair-case, how can I count the ever-changing number of bangles?’

The Badshah was silenced by this intelligent answer. -

LXXVIII

The number of Men and Women

One day the Badshah and Birbal were sitting in the Palace and were busy talking about various matters pertaining to the State. The Begum, who was present there, said to Birbal, ' Whose number is greater in society—that of men or women ?'

Birbal replied on the spur of the moment, ' Both men and women are equal in number, but great confusion is created by the eunuchs in our society. When the census of males is taken, they pass themselves off as males. Again when the census of females is taken, they declare that they are women. '

The Badshah and Begum were pleased at this witty answer.

Kavi Gang's Cleverness

Once the Badshah was enjoying the company of his queens in the harem. There was no male there, for all the queens had conspired to absorb him in so much merriment that he would not think of leaving them. Their plan seemed to bear fruit, for the Badshah walked straight into their trap. When he was completely under their sway, one of the queens sang a song describing vividly the pangs of separation. The Emperor eagerly inquired what made her sing such a song at that time; to which a newly-married queen replied, 'Your Majesty, is it not unfortunate for us that you are occupied with war so much so that you forget us altogether? Is it not an injustice to us? Now only God knows how we pass our days in your

absence. O Fountain of Grace ! you return from the battle-field today after a long time. Do we not expect you to live in our midst for a considerable time and have a pleasant time ?'

'Dear !' replied the Badshah, 'how can I pass all my time in your sweet company ? I can't neglect my duties. I shall, however, live with you for some days.'

These words transported all queens with joy. They bewitched him with various amorous arts so that he forgot everything about his administration. The court was not held for about four months. The courtiers were at their wits' end what to do. They did not know where the Emperor was. They feared that his prolonged absence might lead to a people's revolt.

The queens managed their affairs so tactfully that nobody got even an inkling of his whereabouts. They however feared Birbal and Kavi Gang. They knew that if those two persons suspected his presence in the harem, they would succeed in going into his presence. They posted sentries all around the Palace with orders to arrest anybody crossing them,

however great he might be. The administration was seriously affected by this state of affairs. Urgent orders remained unsigned. The foreign ambassadors were surprised at seeing the throne vacant. They began political intrigues, as there was no central authority in Delhi. Birbal who feared some trouble consequent on this disorder convened a private meeting of loyal courtiers. He said to them, 'The Emperor's absence will bring about the downfall of the Empire. Mischief is afoot and if enemies invade the country, it would be difficult to check them. We should bring the Badshah out at any cost.'

'You have an access to the inner rooms of the Palace,' remarked Todarmal. 'It would be better if you go there and inquire about this.'

'I tried to elicit information from the menials of the harem, but could not get any clue from them.'

'I have been trying for the last four months to find him out, but I succeeded in seeing him only yesterday,' said Kavi Gang.

'Did you?' exclaimed all the courtiers; 'Where did you see him?'

'In the palace of Queen Kamla,' replied Gang proudly.

‘Quite true,’ said Birbal; ‘how can he come to the Darbar, when he is caught in the snare of beautiful queens?’

Gang said, ‘I have detected the whereabouts of the Badshah at the cost of my life, but the most difficult question is how to get him out of it.’

‘If you can’t do it, who else can do it?’ said Birbal to encourage him.

Todarmal and other leading courtiers joined hands in urging Gang to undertake this benevolent task. Gang made different plans to escape from it, but he could not turn down the unanimous request of all the pillars of the State. He agreed to undertake this hazardous task on condition that all should swear to help him in case his life was endangered. All agreed to this proposal amid cries of joy.

Gang thought that he should begin his work instantaneously, because if the queens knew of his resolve, they would make it impossible for him to see the Emperor. After mid-night he wore a long dark robe and a tall dark cap. With a long stick in one hand, he left his home.

He presented a fearful appearance at the

dead of night. He reached the palace-gate, but there was strong guard there. He therefore entered the palace-garden by a secret door. It was dawn and the Badshah, surrounded by his charming queens, was brushing his teeth. Seeing this sight, Gang said to himself, ' Who will renounce this earthly heaven for intricate worldly affairs ? It is a sin to deprive the Badshah of such heavenly bliss. But I must do my duty. If I falter there, I would be betraying the cause of the King and his subjects. Come what may, I should bring him down from Heaven to the royal throne. '

While thinking thus, he came exactly under the balcony where the Emperor was. He then shouted aloud, ' O Badshah ! you appear to be the foremost of men; but do you ever care to know that some call you a horse and others an ass ? '

These words were hardly spoken, when he ran so fast that it was difficult for the palace guards to overtake him. The Badshah sent his men to arrest or behead him. He had recognised the voice of Gang and could see what his words implied. He was so angry that he left the Palace in spite of numerous tricks of

the queens who showered abuses on the person who was responsible for this mischief. Early in the morning, the news that Akbar was in the capital spread throughout Delhi like wild fire. The people danced for joy and all political intrigues subsided. The Darbar was held and the angry Emperor sat on the throne. Kavi Gang was brought there in irons. The Badshah who could recognize him said, 'Are you a goose or a human being?'

Gang took off his tall cap and dropped a deep curtsy. He was soon recognized by all.

'Did you dare to approach me in the harem?' said the Badshah. 'You are liable to death.'

Gang looked at the courtiers, who did not speak a word in his defence. He answered, 'Your Majesty, I would never commit such a folly, but to-day I have led an army of fools. These courtiers have led me into this trap.' He then narrated whatever had happened since the Emperor's disappearance from the public life.

The Emperor was pacified. He said, 'Kavi, don't trust others. You should consider all the circumstances before you take any decisive step.'

He then turned to the courtiers and said, ' You seem to have plotted against the life of this old poet. It is disgraceful for you not to try to save his life. '

All kept mum. The Emperor never swerved from the path of duty after this incident.

LXXX

An Apt Answer

Once upon a time, the Badshah ordered Birbal to produce a cock's egg within three days. This was an impossible task, but Birbal was accustomed to such uphill tasks. In the evening when the Badshah went out for a walk on the river-side, he saw Birbal washing the body of a horse. He said, 'What are you doing, Birbal?'

'Your Majesty!' replied Birbal with folded hands, 'I am transforming this horse into a mare.'

The Badshah laughed at this answer and said, 'You are a great fool to try such an experiment.'

‘ Why ? ’ replied Birbal; ‘ if a cock can lay eggs, why can’t a horse be transformed into a mare ? ’

The Badshah was pleased with this answer and asked Birbal not to worry about the procurement of a cock’s egg.



END